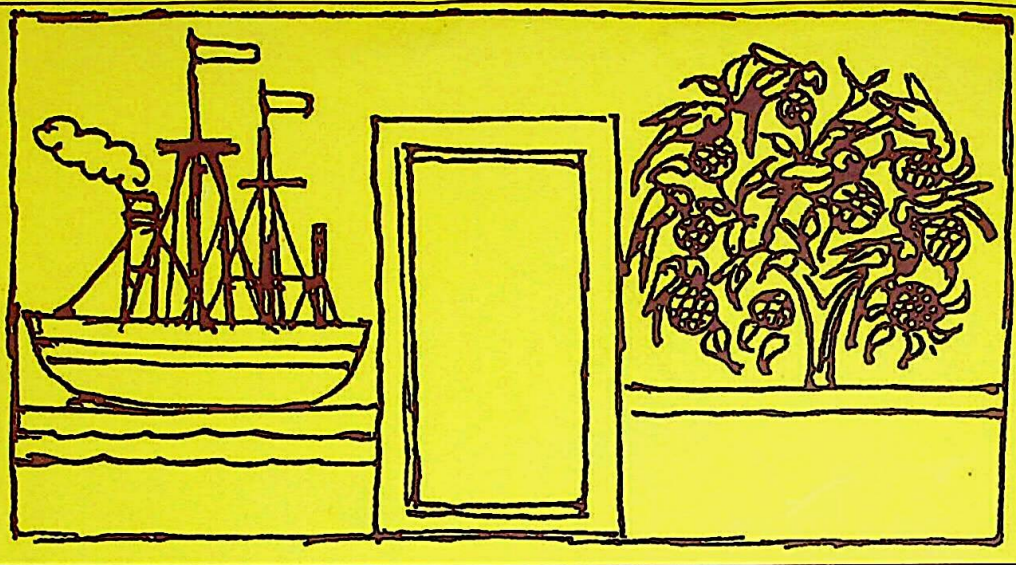


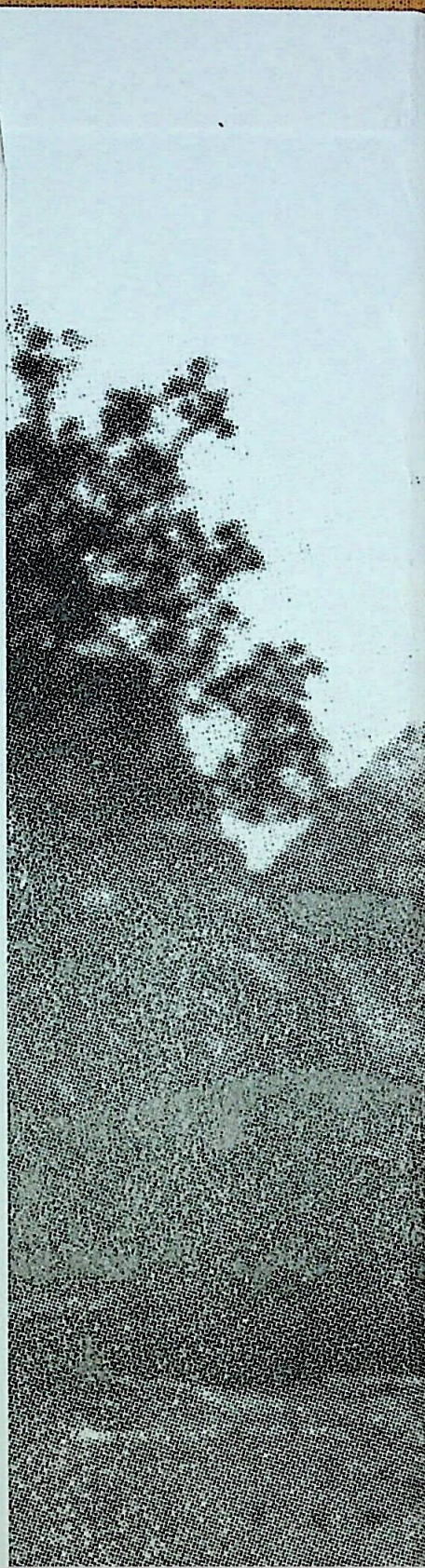
Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas and Our Times:
A Retrospect on His 175th Birth Anniversary

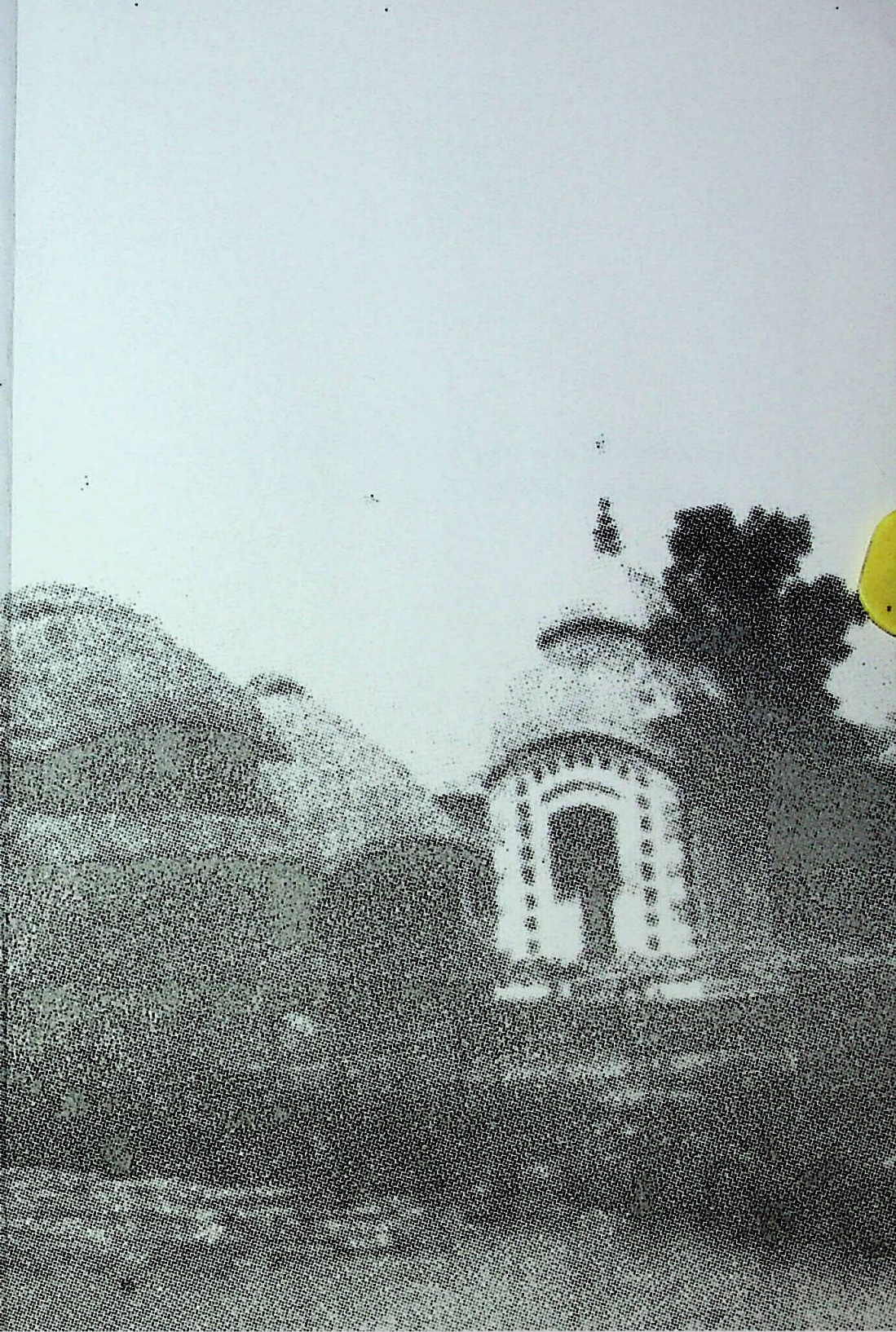
A Commemorative Volume

Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira
Belur Math, Howrah
&
Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture
Golpark, Kolkata

The life of Sri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary searchlight under whose illumination one is able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu religion. ... The books were theories, he was the realization. This man had in fifty-one years lived the five thousand years of national spiritual life and so raised himself to be an object-lesson for future generations. The Vedas can only be explained and the Shastras reconciled by his theory of Avastha or stages — that we must not only tolerate others, but positively embrace them, and that truth is the basis of all religions.

— Swami Vivekananda
Complete Works, Vol. V, p. 53





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Publishers' Note

Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamanidira is an autonomous college affiliated to the Calcutta University. The college is located at Belur Math and offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses in science and arts subjects. On the occasion of the 175th birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna, the college, in collaboration with the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Golpark, organized an international seminar on 19, 20 and 21 January 2012. The seminar was sponsored by the University Grants Commission of India and some other well-wishers. More than 500 delegates, including students and teachers from various colleges, attended the seminar held at the Vivekananda Sabhagriha, Belur Math. Now we are happy to be able to put together the papers presented there, covering different aspects of the ideas and personality of Sri Ramakrishna, into this commemorative

volume titled: *Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas and Our Times: A Retrospect on His 175th Birth Anniversary*. In addition to the papers presented at the seminar, two more articles by Sudipta Kaviraj and Arindam Chakrabarti have also been included in this volume.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all those who have contributed towards the publication of this book – the authors, the editors, the proof-readers, the printers and of course, the sponsors. We will consider this endeavour fruitful if this book could generate further interest in the ideas and personality of Sri Ramakrishna.

Belur Math
28 March 2013

Publishers

Preface

On November 30, 1894, Swami Vivekananda wrote to Alasinga Perumal: "What nonsense about the miracle of Ramakrishna! ... If they [i.e. those writing on Sri Ramakrishna] can write a real life of Shri Ramakrishna with the idea of showing what he came to do and teach, let them do it, otherwise let them not distort his life and sayings." It is obvious from these remarks that soon after the death of Sri Ramakrishna, his life began to be projected in various ways. Swami Vivekananda regarded most of these writings as silly imbecilities. They went against the rational and scientific temper of the age to construct a miracle man out of Sri Ramakrishna and demonstrate, as Swamiji sarcastically remarks, that Ramakrishna had "nothing to do in the world but turning wine into ... [D.] Gupta's medicine." Swamiji may not have been successful in dismantling

this grandiose project of constructing a miracle man out of Sri Ramakrishna, but he had the conviction that it was possible to interpret Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual life in a more philosophical manner. And for this, he felt, it was important to develop a more dispassionate method of interpretation.

How should the extraordinary life of a man who "had in fifty-one years lived the five thousand years of national spiritual life" be written? What kind of language should be employed? Which of his ideas should be disseminated? How should he be presented before foreign readers? Swamiji thought hard on these questions. His letters show that he tried to prepare certain well-defined guidelines for interpreting Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings. However, these guidelines were not strictly followed in later times. The interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's life by different people in different places and at different times has given Ramakrishna literature a unique variety. It seems like there are different routes to reach the goal called Sri Ramakrishna. Various interpreters in India and outside India, in Bengal and outside Bengal, within the Ramakrishna Order and outside, have discovered 'many' forms of the 'one' Ramakrishna. Yet "a real life of Sri Ramakrishna" did not get written. Perhaps "a real life" of Sri Ramakrishna can never be written. It is very difficult to cast the extraordinary life of a man like him in the rigid frame of a mould. And this is why there continues to be an endless interpretation of his life and teachings.

The assessment of Sri Ramakrishna that began in *The Indian Mirror* on March 28, 1875 (later collected by Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay and Sajanikanta Das and published as *Samasamayik Dristitey Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa*) continues unabated. To some he is a 'miracle', to some he is 'a wonderful mixture of God and man', and to some 'an extraordinary searchlight under whose illumination

one is able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu religion'. These early efforts to see Sri Ramakrishna as a unique individual have been transformed in recent times into a project of seeing in him the 'mindscape' of a unique moment in history by postcolonial scholars. For them, Sri Ramakrishna is the door to the pre-colonial world. He takes them, as it were, to the 'uncolonized innocence' of the pre-colonial past and helps them discover the secret history of 'our' modernity. This is the site where we find conscientious efforts to construct a dominant culture opposed to hegemonic colonial culture.

In order to be a part of this tradition of Ramakrishna assessment, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur Math in association with the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Golpark organized an International Seminar between 19th and 21st January 2012 to commemorate his 175th Birth Anniversary. Titled 'Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas and Our Times: A Retrospect on His 175th Birth Anniversary', the Seminar was funded by the UGC and other munificent patrons.

The present volume brings together most of the papers presented at this International Seminar by monks of the Ramakrishna Order, internationally acclaimed thinkers, and young scholars. Altogether eight papers were presented by young scholars and college teachers at the Seminar out of which six are included in this volume. Two of them are in Bengali. The volume also contains two valuable articles – an edited version of the text of the lecture delivered by Professor Sudipta Kaviraj at Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira on 23rd December 2011 and an original, unpublished essay by Professor Arindam Chakrabarti.

We have received invaluable help and advice from many people in organizing the Seminar and publishing this commemorative volume. We convey our thanks and gratitude to all of them. We owe a debt

of gratitude to Swami Vimalatmananda, Swami Sarvapriyananda, Swami Krishnanathanada, Brahmachari Vishwapatichaitanya, Professor Prabir Hui, Sri S. K. Roy, Sri M. P. Jalan and Sri Tapas Saha for their unstinted support and cooperation. We take this opportunity to convey our sincere thanks to them.

Belur Math
13 March 2013

Editors

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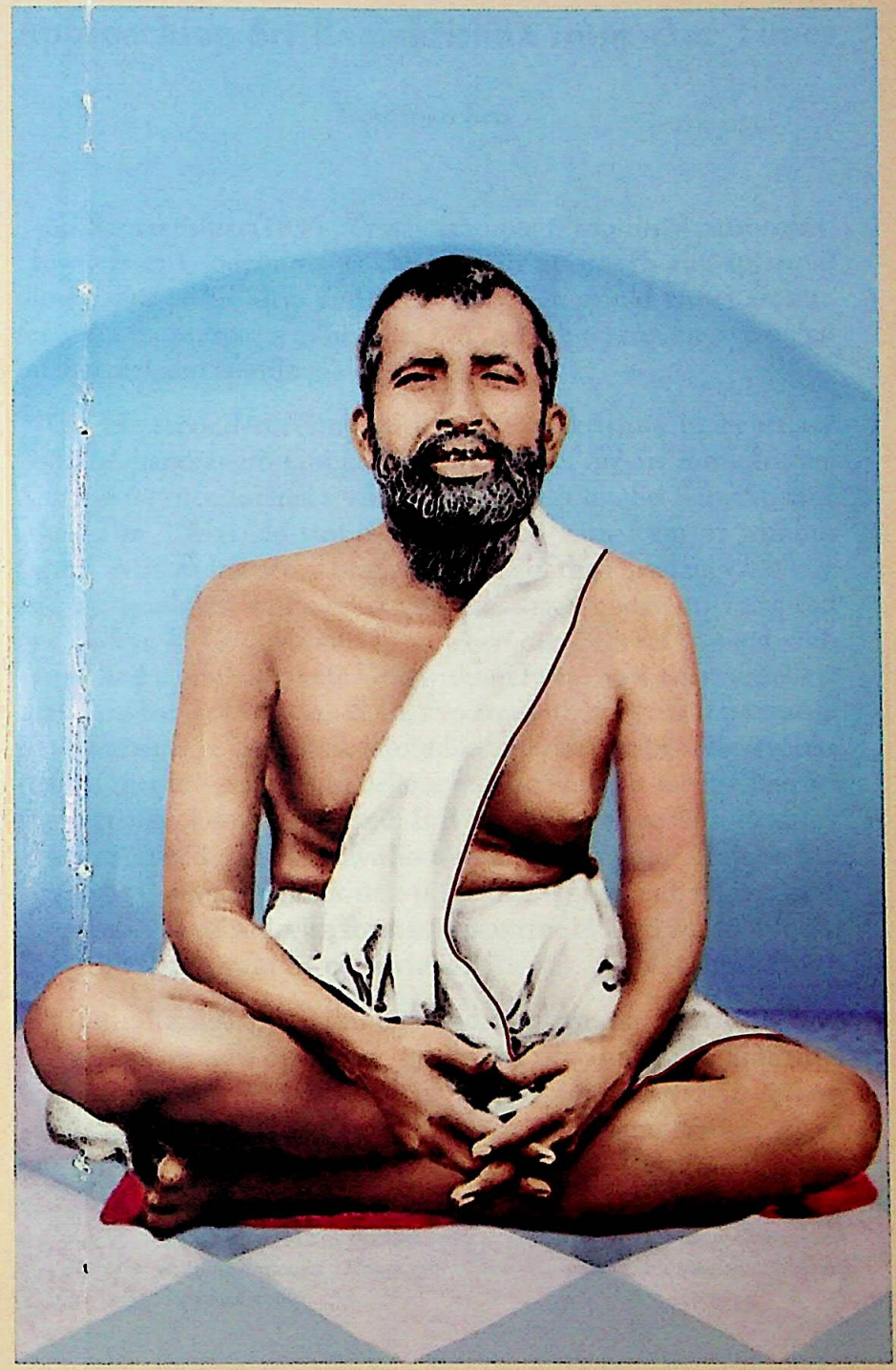
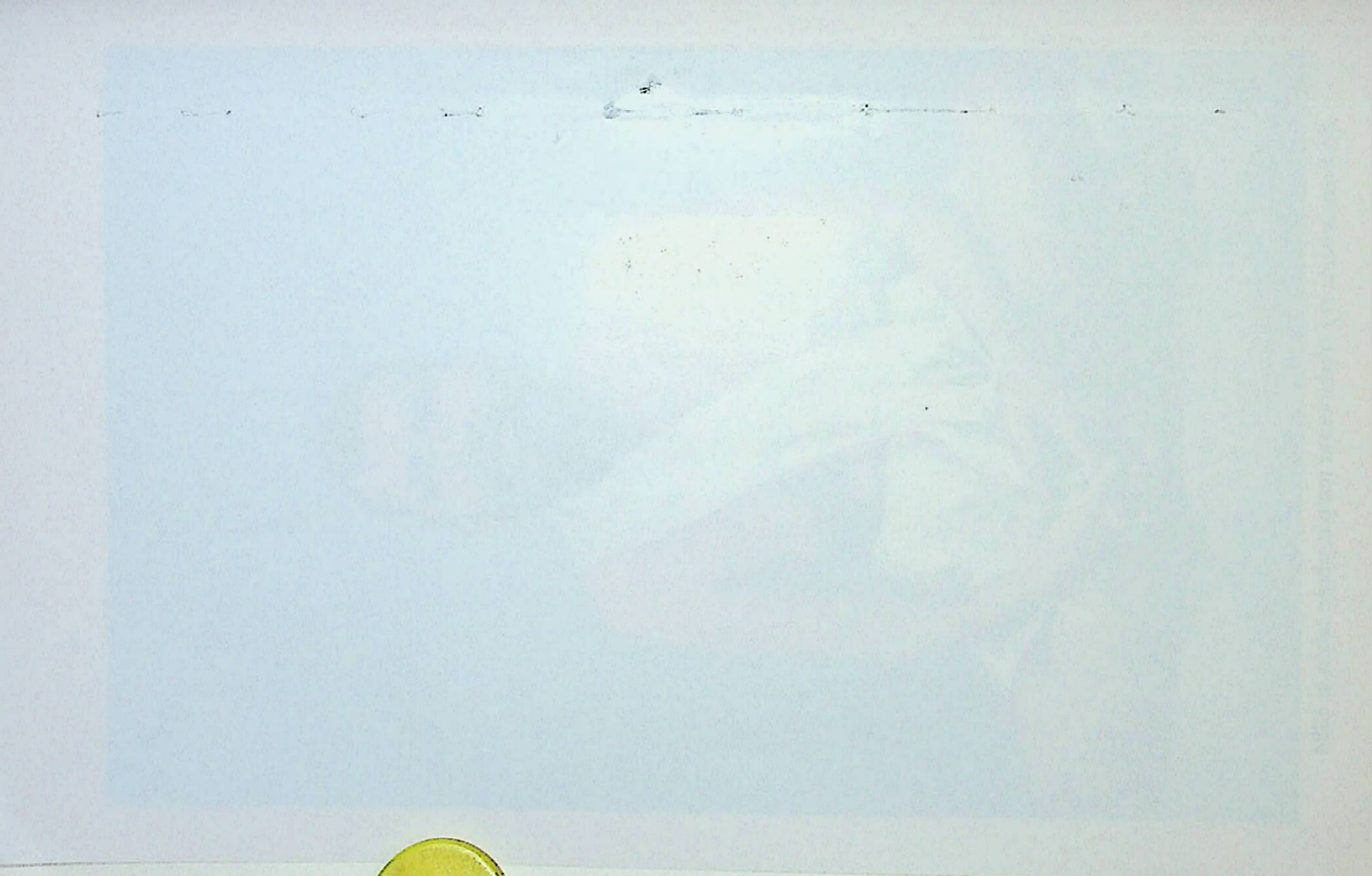


Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar temple, photo taken in 1884



Approaching Sri Ramakrishna from Our Times

Sandipan Sen

Sri Ramakrishna (1836-86) was a thoroughly spiritual personality. However it is beyond our capacity to approach the spiritual dimensions of his ideas and personality. We would rather seek to focus on those aspects of his ideas with which we can engage on an intellectual and emotional level.

On his second meeting with Sri Ramakrishna in February 1882 Mahendranath Gupta, the compiler of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* encountered a very peculiar situation. Sri Ramakrishna asked him: "Well, do you believe in God with form or without form?" Mahendranath, a bright alumnus of the Presidency College and the headmaster of a school in Calcutta, wondered: "How can one believe in God without form when one believes in God with form? And if one believes in God without form, how can one believe that God has a form? Can these two contradictory ideas be true at the same time? Can a white liquid like milk be black?" However he replied that he preferred to believe in God without form. Then Sri Ramakrishna said: "Very good. It is enough to have faith in either aspect. You believe in God without form; that is quite all right. But never for a moment think that this alone is true and all else false. Remember that God with form is just as true as God without form. But hold fast to your own conviction."[1]

Mahendranath found this repeated emphasis on the truthfulness of two seemingly opposing attributes of God quite amazing. Mahendranath was a product of the Western education system introduced by the British in India. But he never came across such an

---

This is an edited version of the 'Theme of the Seminar' presented at the inaugural session of the seminar on 19 January 2012 by the Convener of the Seminar Organizing Committee. The author is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur Math.

idea in any book that he had read. It was quite likely to be so, as the Western modernity founded on the principles of 'Enlightenment' taught him a worldview of hierarchically structured 'binary oppositions'[2] which insisted on viewing things in absolute or 'either/or' terms. From this worldview one has to choose either science or religion, either reason or faith, either matter or consciousness, either modernity or tradition; there is no middle path. It was from this worldview that the chief architect of the Western education system in India Thomas Babington Macaulay proudly proclaimed the supremacy of Western wisdom in 1835.[3] And in the same line John Stuart Mill, one of the champions of Western Liberalism justified the colonial rule of the British over the backward societies in 1861.[4]

Sri Ramakrishna was never defensive or apologetic about his values. On the one hand he refused to accept the dictates of a lifeless ritualistic Hindu religion, while on the other he never bowed before the hegemonic designs of Western modernism. However, he never condemned anybody. Instead, through his daily living and deeds, through his face to face interaction with people around him he laid down the foundations of his lofty ideas.

In the course of his rigorous spiritual practices or *sādhanā* for twelve long years Sri Ramakrishna realized that the Ultimate Reality was one and it was omnipresent.[5] That is why he could equate service to living beings with the worship of God, *"Shivajnāne Jivsevā."*[6] His realization was based on the *scientific* methods of observation, comparison and verification. And he proclaimed that 'knowing' the Ultimate Reality was the goal of life: *"Jibaner Uddeshya Ishvar Lābh."*[7] At the same time he stated that the Supreme Consciousness manifested itself in infinite forms and could be realized through innumerable means. Accordingly he said: *"Jata Mat, Tata Path."*[8] – as many faiths, so many ways. So the method Sri Ramakrishna adopted for his experiments with truth was scientific, although the answers that he came across in the end were spiritual in nature. Here he became the great synthesizer. Sri Ramakrishna's approach towards the concept of God and religion can be emulated in other fields of life as well.

During his *Upanayan* or sacred thread ceremony, just in order to keep his promise to Dhani Kamarni[9], a low caste woman, he accepted his first alms from her in opposition to social custom. During his Islam *sādhanā* he took initiation from a Sufi priest Govinda Roy. He rebuked his conservative devotees like 'Kāpten' Vishwanath Upadhyay for pressing him not to mix with a 'Bhrastācār' or a recusant, like Keshab Chandra Sen.[10] So Sri Ramakrishna's insistence on seeing God in all was not merely a pious concept; it was rather a way of life for him. He never compromised with his principles; he never had *"Bhāver Ghare Churi"* or as Swami Bhuteshananda put it: "theft in the world of being or bhava."[11] Thus he was not merely a teacher, but an 'Ācārya', whose life exemplified his ideas.

Sri Ramakrishna's style of communication was unique. He never gave a lecture from the podium but engaged himself in intense dialogues with everyone who came to see him. These dialogues were spontaneous, open-ended, full of metaphors, humour, and songs, and more importantly characterized by a keen observation on human behaviour.

He presented his ideas in such a fashion that they were not only attractive to the spiritual seekers but also to someone who was even a non-believer. There were many down-to-earth solutions to some of the most critical problems of practical life. Say for instance the story of the snake which was advised by its master not to bite but to show an angry posture, if necessary.[12] Or, the story of a Guru advising his disciple to listen to the words of the 'Māhout Nārāyan', while facing a raging elephant.[13] Or even the depiction of the hypocritical goldsmiths who used to utter the name of God while robbing their innocent customers.[14]

Sri Ramakrishna denounced all forms of power structures and relations through the deliberations in his private as well as public life – gently, but firmly. In his youth Sri Ramakrishna refused to accept the *usual* course of life dictated by the society and decided not to continue his study for the mere purpose of earning money.[15] He rather chose to experiment in his own manner in the realm of

spirituality and remained unconcerned about the opinions of others. Later on he took the formal vows of monastic life from Totapuri,[16] yet he continued to take care of his mother and wife just like a faithful son or husband.[17] He never uttered a harsh word to his wife Sarada Devi.[18] Not only that, he even worshipped her.[19] It was not an act of 'marginalization through deification'; rather it was an act of empowering through *acceptance*. That was why Sri Ramakrishna entrusted Sarada Devi with the task of giving spiritual guidance to mankind after his passing away.[20]

In his public interactions there was no sign of domination or imposition, or even any visible attempt to arrive at any definite conclusion. Yet whoever joined in those discourses found himself moulded in the charm of Sri Ramakrishna's loving personality. His genuine humility, respect for others' viewpoint, and childlike simplicity attracted everyone.[21]

These were the qualities that the people of Calcutta of late nineteenth century needed most to combat their inner contradictions. In the twenty-first century, perhaps we need them even more.

The most striking change we may experience in our daily lives today from the times of Sri Ramakrishna is that of rapidly shrinking time and space. Sri Ramakrishna had to travel for two long days to come to Dakshineswar from his native place Kamarpukur, a village in the Hooghly district of Bengal. It was only a distance of about 100 kilometers. On the contrary, today in two days one can travel around the globe in commercial flights. He had to travel in a horse-driven cart all through the length and breadth of the city of Calcutta to communicate his ideas to his admirers, devotees and followers. There was no motorized car, nor any electronic communication system. Now we have the Internet and the mobile phone to connect with the world and share our words, ideas, and emotions.

Indeed the world is becoming a smaller place, thanks to the scientific and technological revolutions that have taken place in the last few decades. Not only this, these revolutions have produced

a huge amount of goods and services for our consumption and enjoyment. Spectacular innovations in the field of medical sciences have raised our life expectancy. Thus we now live longer and consume more, provided we can *afford* it. However this affordability factor has created a seemingly unbridgeable gap among the world population.[22]

As a consequence of our physical proximity to and increased connectivity with other countries and cultures, we are now bound to live in a more heterogeneous society with ever more divergent worldviews. So the world we live in seems to be more complicated than ever. The demand for a pluralist perspective has never been felt so urgently in every sphere of our daily lives. But unfortunately, instead of adapting ourselves with multiple identities we are inclining towards rigid homogeneities. Instead of having a genuine pluralist worldview we are finding refuge in dogmatic ones. Instead of restraining our consumption for the sustenance of our posterity we are destroying our environs. Instead of creating a prosperous world for *all* we are attempting in vain to gratify our narrow self-interest. Actually we have shrunken our own ideas of 'self', leading to a rapid proliferation of arrogance, intolerance, hatred and violence in our private as well as public spheres. *This* is the irony of our existence. And *here* we may learn a lot from Sri Ramakrishna's ideas.

Sri Ramakrishna saw that the real cause of our bondage did not lie in conditions external to us; they had their origins in our minds. So until and unless we are able to cross the limits of our own narrow self we can never enjoy real freedom. For him real *sādhanā* consisted not merely in renouncing sense objects, but in giving up the narrow self or 'Ahamkāra' itself.[23] It is not an act of self-denial, but rather a leap beyond the limitations of the immature self or 'Kānchā Āmi'[24] towards the more mature self or 'Pākā Āmi'[25]. It is a state of mind, attaining which one becomes fearless, ceases to discriminate among beings and is able to associate himself with the joy and pain of everyone. In this state of mind one regards nobody as a stranger and remains engaged in doing good to all, i.e., *"Sarvabhutahite ratāh"*.[26]

In this age of commercial and technological globalization *this* is the kind of consciousness that we need to inculcate. This is a kind of consciousness which on the one hand liberates the individual self and at the same time ensures the welfare of the world, as Swami Vivekananda put it in a unique way: *"Ātmano Mokṣārtham Jagaddhitāya Ca."* And Sri Ramakrishna's personality was an embodiment of such an ideal state of consciousness.

We believe these aspects of Sri Ramakrishna's ideas and personality have the power to stir our thoughts even today and inspire us to face the challenges of our own times more effectively. To explore, analyze and appreciate these dimensions of Sri Ramakrishna's ideas we have identified some key areas to focus on in this volume. They are: the life and times of Sri Ramakrishna; Sri Ramakrishna: the man and his personality; Sri Ramakrishna's ideas; *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* as a text; Sri Ramakrishna and our times, and perspectives on Sri Ramakrishna. We hope that this commemorative volume containing the papers presented at an international seminar held on 19, 20 and 21 January 2012 at Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur Math, to mark the 175th birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna will provide us an opportunity to come closer to Sri Ramakrishna's ideas and personality and enrich ourselves.

Notes and References

1 Mahendranath Gupta ("M."), *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, translated from the original Bengali book *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamita* by Swami Nikhilananda [1942], Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre, New York, Ch. 1, pp. 87-88 and passim

2 According to Jacques Derrida, it has been a characteristic of the Western philosophical and scientific tradition since the classical times to think in binary oppositions. Presence opposes absence, speech opposes writing, philosophy opposes literature, the literal opposes the metaphorical, the central opposes the marginal, life opposes death, the real opposes the imaginary, the normal opposes the pathological, etc. Derrida shows how one of the oppositional terms is always privileged, controlling and dominating 'the other'. Commenting on

this Derrida says: "...in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand." See: *Positions*, tr. by Allan Bass, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, p. 41, accesed at [http://www.scribd.com/doc/32007056/Jacques-Derrida-Positions] on 15.08.12; the concept is further explained in an article as following: "Certain forms of inequality, including those of race and gender, derive from the signifying effect of socio-cultural structures. These discursive frameworks, situated within language and social arrangements, reproduce hierarchical binary oppositions such as ... 'white/black' and 'man/woman'." See: Paddy McQueen, "Social and Political Recognition" in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, retrieved from [http://www.iep.utm.edu/recog_sp/] on 13.01.12

"It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England. In every branch of physical or moral philosophy, the relative position of the two nations is nearly the same." See: "Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2 February 1835", in *Bureau of Education. Selections from Educational Records, Part I (1781-1839)*, ed. by H. Sharp Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing [1920], Reprint, Delhi: National Archives of India, 1965, pp. 107-117, retrieved from [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html] on 12.01.12

4 John Stuart Mill passionately pleaded in favour of the rule by "foreign force", if necessary "despotic", for super inducing improvement by "government of leading strings", preferably the British. Because, in his assessment, "The state of different communities in point of culture and development ranges downwards to a condition very little above the highest of the beasts." In their hierarchical ordering of societies on a "scale of civilization" the liberals gave inferior ranks to all non-European peoples, with a "prospect of future equality" under the "British benevolence" whereby they would be carried "through several stages of progress" clearing away any "obstacles to improvement". See: John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* [1862], Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York, p. 91

5 About this realization Sri Ramakrishna himself said: "The universe is conscious on account of the Consciousness of God. Sometimes I find that this Consciousness wriggles about, as it were, even in small fish. ... Sometimes

I find that the universe is saturated with the Consciousness of God, as the earth is soaked with water in the rainy season." – *Gospel*, Ch. 12, p. 287; for a detailed discussion on this see: Swami Saradananda, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga* (Bengali), B.S. 1398, Udbodhan Karyalay, Kolkata, Vol. 2, *Gurubhav – Uttarardha*, pp. 151-2 and passim

[6] *Lilaprasanga*, Vol. 2, *Thakurer Divyabhav O Narendranath*, pp. 239-40

[7] Sri M., *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (Bengali), Complete edition, 1990, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, p. 101; in another occasion Sri Ramakrishna said: "To realize God is the one goal of life. While aiming his arrow at the mark, Arjuna said, 'I see only the eye of the bird and nothing else-not the kings, not the trees, not even the bird itself.'" – *Gospel*, Ch. 20, p. 431

[8] *Lilaprasanga*, Vol. 1, *Sadhakbhav*, pp. 307, 378

[9] See: *Lilaprasanga*, Vol. 1, *Purvakatha O Balyajeevan*, pp. 111-12

[10] In a sharp reply to the Captain's insistence Sri Ramakrishna said: "Why shouldn't I go to see Keshab? You feel at ease when you go to the Governor General's house, and for money at that. Keshab thinks of God and chants His name. Isn't it you who are always saying that God Himself has become the universe and all its living beings? Doesn't God dwell in Keshab also?" – *Gospel*, Ch. 19, p. 307

[11] Swami Bhuteshananda, "Religion and Life" in the Internet edition of the *Magazine of the Vedanta Centre*, UK, September/October 2002

[12] *Gospel*, Ch. 1, pp. 93-94

[13] Ibid, Ch. 1, pp. 92-93

[14] Ibid, Ch. 34, p. 737

[15] See: "*Chalkola bandha vidya ami shikhite chahi na ....*" in *Lilaprasanga*, Vol. 1, *Sadhakbhav*, p. 60

[16] *Lilaprasanga*, Vol. 1, *Sadhakbhav*, pp. 290-98

[17] See: *Lilaprasanga*, Vol. 1, *Purvakatha O Balyajeevan*, pp. 320-22; in a quite unlikely fashion of a monk he publicly spoke of his affection and responsibilities towards his mother: "When I went to Vrindavan I felt no desire to return to Calcutta. ... I felt an intense desire to live at Vrindavan. But just then I remembered my mother. That completely changed everything. She was old. I said to myself: 'My devotion to God will take to its wings if I have to

worry about my mother. I would rather live with her. Then I shall have peace of mind and be able to meditate on God.'" – *Gospel*, Ch. 29, p. 624

[18] Swami Arupananda, (complier), *Sri Sri Mayer Katha* (Bengali), 1994, Udbodhan Karyalay, Kolkata, p. 63

[19] *Lilaprasanga*, Vol. 1, *Sadhakbhav*, pp. 365-68

[20] See: Swami Gambhirananda, *Sri Ma Sarada Devi* (Bengali), 1996, Udbodhan Karyalay, Kolkata, p. 96

[21] Aswini Kumar Dutta, a noted social activist and littérateur commented on his interactions with Sri Ramakrishna this way: "I saw the Master not more than four or five times; but in that short time we became so intimate that I felt as if we had been class-mates. How much liberty I took while speaking with him! But no sooner had I left his presence than it flashed on me: "Goodness gracious! Think where I have been!" What I saw and received in those few days has sweetened my whole life. That Elysian smile of his, laden with nectar, I have locked up in the secret closet of my memory." – *Gospel*, Appendix B, p. 1153

[22] As Amartya Sen in his *Development As Freedom* (2000) opined: "Despite unprecedented increases in opulence, the contemporary world denies elementary freedoms to vast numbers – perhaps even the majority – of people." – Amartya Sen, *Development As Freedom*, 2000, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p. 4

[23] See: "Master: Maya is nothing but the egotism of the embodied soul. This egotism has covered everything like a veil. 'All troubles come to an end when the ego dies.' If by the grace of God a man but once realizes that he is not the doer, then he at once becomes a Jivanmukta. Though living in the body, he is liberated. He has nothing else to fear. ...

"The jiva is nothing but the embodiment of Satchidananda. But since maya, or ego, has created various upadhis, he has forgotten his real Self.

"Each upadhi changes man's nature....

"Money is also a great upadhi. The possession of money makes such a difference in a man! He is no longer the same person....

"One can get rid of the ego after the attainment of Knowledge. On attaining Knowledge one goes into samādhi, and the ego disappears...." – *Gospel*, Ch. 7, pp. 186-87

[24] See: "Master: ...The 'I' that makes one a worldly person and attaches one to 'woman and gold' is the 'wicked I'. The intervention of this ego creates the difference between jiva and Ātman. Water appears to be divided into two parts if one puts a stick across it. But in reality there is only one water. It appears as two on account of the stick. This 'I' is the stick. Remove the stick and there remains only one water as before.

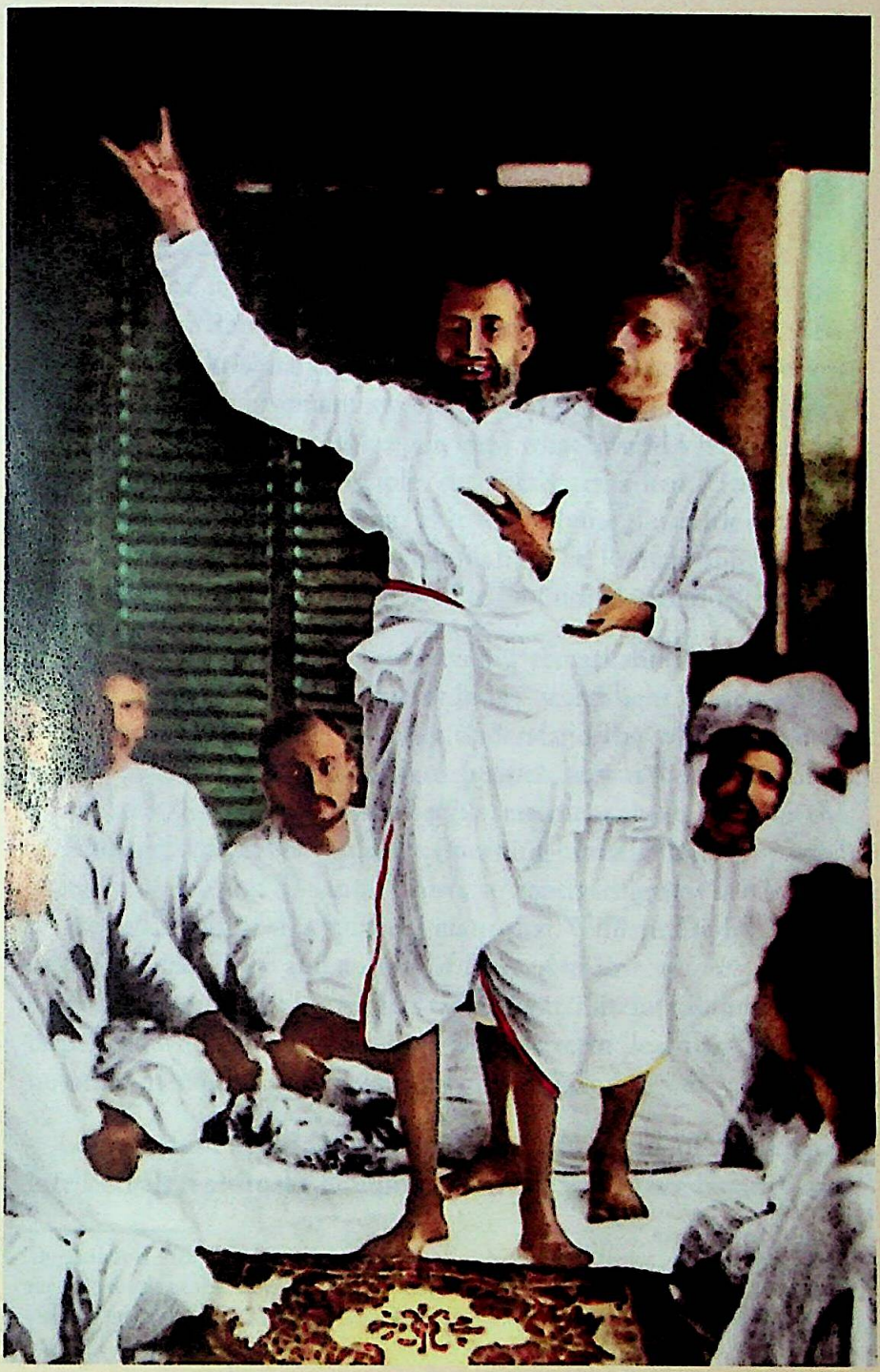
"Now, what is this 'wicked I'? It is the ego that says: 'What? Don't they know me? I have so much money! Who is wealthier than I?' If a thief robs such a man of only ten rupees, first of all he wrings the money out of the thief, then he gives him a good beating. But the matter doesn't end there: the thief is handed over to the police and is eventually sent to jail. The 'wicked I' says: 'What? Doesn't the rogue know whom he has robbed? To steal my ten rupees! How dare he?'" – *Gospel*, Ch. 7, pp. 187-78

[25] See: "Master: ...I said to Keshab: '"I" and "mine" indicate ignorance. Without ignorance one cannot have such a feeling as "I am the doer; these are my wife, children, possessions, name and fame".' Thereupon Keshab said, 'Sir, if one gave up the "I", nothing whatsoever would remain.' I reassured him and said: 'I am not asking you to give up all of the "I". You should give up only the "unripe I". The "unripe I" makes one feel: "I am the doer. These are my wife and children. I am a teacher." Renounce this "unripe I" and keep the "ripe I", which will make you feel that you are the servant of God, His devotee, and that God is the Doer and you are His instrument.'" – *Gospel*, Ch. 12, p. 297

[26] *Bhagavadgita*, 12.4; in Sri Ramakrishna's own words: "Who is the best devotee of God? It is he who sees, after the realization of Brahman, that God alone has become all living beings, the universe, and the twenty-four cosmic principles. One must discriminate at first, saying 'Not this, not this', and reach the roof. After that one realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof, namely, brick, lime, and brick-dust. The devotee realizes that it is Brahman alone that has become all these-the living beings, the universe, and so on....

"Chaitanya, Consciousness, is awakened after Advaita-jnāna, the Knowledge of the non-dual Brahman. Then one perceives that God alone exists in all beings as Consciousness. After this realization comes Ānanda, Bliss. Advaita, Chaitanya, and Nityananda." – *Gospel*, Ch. 12, p. 300

The Life and Times of Sri Ramakrishna



Sri Ramakrishna at Kamal Kutir in Calcutta, the residence of
Keshab Chandra Sen, photo taken on 21 September 1879

Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas and Our Times

Swami Prabhananda

On the occasion of the 175th Birth Anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna it is worthwhile to review in to-day's context the impact of Sri Ramakrishna's ideas. His admirers uphold the view that Sri Ramakrishna as also the ideas he represents, are now on the crest of the movement sweeping all over India and a number of countries abroad. Let us keep in view what Swami Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna's chief disciple, succinctly remarked: 'The life of Sri Ramakrishna is interesting, as it was a living illustration of the ideas that he preached'.[1] Following this hint, Sri Ramakrishna's life as well as the ideas he propagated need to be studied with due *sraddha*.

Sri Ramakrishna, no doubt, lived a remarkable life of about 51 years. His life 'was an extraordinary searchlight under whose illumination one is able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu religion .... The books were theories, he was the realisation.'[2] Along with this we may remember his statement about himself: 'the spiritual experiences of this place (meaning himself) have surpassed even the Vedas and Vedanta.'[3] Also, so captivating was the impact of the teachings of this spiritual giant that William Digby, Editor of the *Madras Times* and author of *Prosperous British India* (1901), drew the attention of his readers to the fact: 'illiterate Ramakrishna of Bengal, who knowing naught of what we term "learning" spoke as no other men of his age spoke, and revealed God to weary mortals.'

Long before Sri Ramakrishna drew attention of 'Calcutta's intellectuals', spiritually illumined souls like Vaishnavacharan, Gauri

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Pandit, Bhairavi Brahmani, Totapuri and a few others recongised his greatness. Thereafter, Sikh sepoys from the Dakshineswar powder magazine and the Barrackpore cantonment, together with a group of Marwari businessmen from Burrabazar quarters of Calcutta, pilgrims to Gangasagar and other wayfarers, gathered around the saint. Quickly but steadily his words spread. However, his meeting with Keshab Chandra Sen, on the 15 March 1875, was a turning point. Soon thereafter, his words and ideas came to the limelight by the press first. Here are a few examples:

Indian Mirror, 28 March 1875: 'We met one not long ago and were charmed by the depth, penetration and simplicity of his spirit. The never-ceasing metaphors and analogies, in which he indulged, are most of them as apt as they are beautiful....'

Dharmatattva, 27 February, 1879: 'অগ্নি সর্বত্র আছে; কিন্তু শুষ্ক কাষ্ঠে অগ্নির উজ্জ্বল প্রকাশ হয়, সেইরূপ যা সকল জীবের শরীর-রূপ চিকের ভিতর ধনীর কন্যার ন্যায় লুকাইয়া আছেন, কেবল বৈরাগীই তাঁহাকে দেখিতে পায়। যত দিন বিবেক বৈরাগ্য আগুনে মায়ারস শুকাইয়া না যায় ততদিন মাকে কেহ ভালোরূপে দেখিতে পায় না।'

The New Dispensation, 7 July 1881: In the course of an animated conversation with our devotees, the Paramahamsa of Dakshineswar lately expounded the Hindu doctrine of Trinity. He spoke of 'Bhagaban', 'Bhagavat' and 'Bhakta' as three entities, yet one in essence – the mysterious three in one. The first signified the Godhead; the second, Scripture or Word; the third, Devotee or Saint.'

We understand that every biographer of Sri Ramakrishna or even collector and collator of his sayings, basically depended on his own perception, which was guided by his mental environment and skill. To illustrate this, we refer to the first part of Suresh Chandra Dutta's collection of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings. There is no mention of Motherhood of God, nor of one popular teaching of the Master – his warning against the temptation of *Kamini* and *Kanchan*. Even 'M.',

the chronicler of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, the most admired by modern scholars, was challenged in his days by Pramadadas Mitra who was close to half a dozen Sri Ramakrishna's direct disciples. 'M.' defended himself saying that he had presented the Master in the *Kathamrita* as he understood him. Swami Adbhutananda, perhaps the most illiterate among the Master's monastic disciples, went one step further when he said that everybody understood the Master as the latter made him understand in keeping with his mental constitution.

Gwilym Beckerlegge in his book *The Ramakrishna Mission* (2000) remarked: 'Both Ramakrishna and then Vivekananda have been constantly invented and represented in the light of the interests and concerns of those who have written about them – whether as 'insiders' or 'outsiders' relative to the Ramakrishna Movement.'[4] The first generation biographies have also been accused of hagiographical excess. 'M.' too has not been spared. But to accuse the first generation authors like 'M.' and Swami Saradananda that they have 'constantly invented and represented' to serve their specific motives is hard to sustain.

The writers of first generation of Ramakrishna studies are those who knew Sri Ramakrishna personally and heard his words directly. Among these studies two titles, 'M.'s (Mahendranath Gupta's) *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (1902-1932) and Swami Saradananda's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga* (1911-1918) are shining stars in the sky of Ramakrishna studies. Quite valuable is Suresh Chandra Dutta's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Deber Samkhipta Jeevani O Upadesh* (1887) which was later enlarged and published under the title *Paramahamsa Ramakrishner Ukti*; Keshab Chandra Sen's *Paramahamser Ukti* (1878), Ramachandra Dutta's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa Deber Jibanbrittanta* (1890), Satyacharan Mitra's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa* (1897), Akshay Kumar Sen's *Sri Ramakrishna Punthi* (1901), need mention. Strangely enough, Bengali littérateur

Bhubanchandra Mukhopadhyaya's *Ramakrishna Charitamrita* (1901) did not get the publicity it deserves.

Swami Vivekananda once desired to see a biography of Sri Ramakrishna which would serve as an illustration of his own teachings. Dr. Sashibhusan Ghosh, who had met Sri Ramakrishna and also got in touch with most of the direct disciples of the Master, ventured to address this issue. In his book *Sri Ramakrishnadeva* (1916), he succeeded to some extent, no doubt.

To this first generation of Ramakrishna studies the following contemporary writings in English (a) Pratap Chandra Majumdar's valuable observation about Sri Ramakrishna in his biography on Keshab Chandra Sen, (b) Sibnath Sastri's *Men I have Seen* (1919), and (c) C. H. Tawney's *A Modern Hindu Saint* (1896) may be considered. Some may arguably question if Mr. Tawney had direct encounter with Sri Ramakrishna.

Max Müller expressed his wish to write a book on Ramakrishna if sufficient materials were made available. Swami Vivekananda asked his brother disciple Swami Ramakrishnananda to supply the same suggesting that 'we must take care to present only the universal aspects of his teachings' and also to translate Sri Ramakrishna's sayings carefully, as for example *Kamini-Kanchan* should be presented as lust and gold. The material sent, however, could not satisfy Müller. He complained of intrusion of 'traditional elements' which Müller defined as the 'dialogic process' – by that expression he meant 'irrepressible miraculising tendencies of devoted disciples' – the tendency of mytholging the historical facts. As expected, Müller, in his book *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings* interpreted Sri Ramakrishna according to European standard using Western methodology.

Among the second generation scholars on Sri Ramakrishna two authors, Nobel Laureate Romain Rolland and Nobel Laureate

Christopher Isherwood, deserve special mention. While Rolland's advocacy helped to spread Sri Ramakrishna's fame further and to a more diverse audience, Isherwood's suggestion that Sri Ramakrishna could have been an *Avatar* invited severe criticism from his literary friends, who regretted that the great talent had succumbed to Hindu superstitions.

By the 1960, scholars from the West seem to have been haunted by suspicion. Most of them considered Sri Ramakrishna's mystical experience outside the realm of normative human behaviors. Walter Neevel suspected Swami Saradananda, a first generation writer, to have reconstructed Sri Ramakrishna's biography with certain motive. Neevel suspects Sri Ramakrishna's 'insiders' overemphasized the significance of his attaining *nirvikalpa Samadhi.* [5]

Some scholars believe that Sri Ramakrishna's direct experience of the ultimate truth is science-like rather than scientific. It is subjective in nature; it is experiential, not empirical. While followers of Sri Ramakrishna are satisfied with the Master's spiritual experience, philosophers are not; the latter consider the saint's mystical experiences to be controversial as sources of knowledge. Philosophy is the English rendering of the Sanskrit word *darsana* which means seeing or experience. Traditionally Indian philosophy was not merely metaphysical speculation but its foundation was in immediate perception. Religion is concerned with immediate perception of the truth. Sri Ramakrishna was least interested in speculative exploration. He was happy with having direct communion with God.

Amusingly enough, psychoanalysts entered into the field and presented the saint as a victim of 'severe psychopathology'.[6] Malcom McLean translated *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* into English. Since Sri Ramakrishna said 'he had a feminine nature', the translator branded him a homosexual. Guided by Western paradigm, a number of them further claimed Sri Ramakrishna's monism to be Tantric

monism and not Vedantic monism. Western trained Sudhir Kakar does not view his mysticism in terms of psychopathology, though he views mystical experience a 'deeper regression'. Jeffry Kripal discusses the 'secret' of Sri Ramakrishna's life only to conclude that he was 'a conflicted, unwilling homoerotic Tantrika.'[7] To Kripal, the word '*Uddipan*' means not 'spiritually enkindled' but 'aroused' or 'sexual excitement'; likewise also the word '*guhya*' used about eighteen times hints at sexuality. Incidentally, the word *guhya* appears about a dozen of times in *Bhagavadgita*.

Here, in India, besides interpreters within the fold of the Ramakrishna Mission, scholars like Sumit Sarkar, Amiya P. Sen, have done good job from their own perspectives. Their works have been accepted by the moderns to be free from the hassles of hagiography, 'dialogic process', etc. Philosophers, who consider their approach scientific, can hardly be questioned about their understanding of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual experiences. But I wonder whether any of these scholars is competent to assess the spiritual experiences of Sri Ramakrishna and his related statement. Have the modern scholars studied the spiritual base of the writings of 'M.', Swami Saradananda, Swami Vivekananda and others who had not only lived in the holy company of the saint but they themselves lived spiritual life steadfastly following their Master's instructions?

'M.' records in the *Gospel*, one day, after coming down from *Samadhi* and regaining partial consciousness of his surroundings, the Master lamented: 'Alas! To whom shall I say all these? Who will understand me?'[8] Sometime earlier, when, two of his lay disciples began speaking of him publicly as a divine incarnation and the matter was reported to him, the Master laughed, saying, 'Do they think they will enhance my glory that way? One of them is an actor on the stage and the other is a physician. What do they know about Incarnation?'

When we consider the retrospect on Sri Ramakrishna's 175th birth

anniversary we are confronted with several issues; of them we shall touch upon a few only.

First, one notes difference between the political and social, cultural and religious contexts of nineteenth century Bengal and of our country as also of our world today. Times have changed. Today it is difficult to entirely separate religion from politics and culture of the land; colonization is gone, globalization is in the air. Since early nineties of the last century, open economy has brought about unprecedented changes. India is emerging as a major economic power; at the same time creating greater and greater divide between the rich and the poor.

Second, while writing concluding observation for his book *Ramakrishna Paramahamsa*, historian Amiya P. Sen expressed his apprehension: 'Every life begets its own queries and questions, and the one most commonly asked about Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa is an explanation of the enduring legacy of the man and his words. This is not easily forthcoming, partly on account of the conflicting ways he has been perceived in his life time as well as by posterity.'[9]

On the other hand, Manisankar Mukherjee, a popular littérateur, made a thoughtful evaluation of one aspect of the legacy of Sri Ramakrishna' words and deeds. Considering the legacy of four contemporary national personalities – Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda – every one of them dreamt of founding 'Ashrama'-centric establishment. He has rightly questioned the fate of those endevaours? In about one hundred years Sabarmati Ashrama has turned into a museum. Pondicherry has lost lustre of its past glory and 'Ashrama'-life at Santiniketan has gone down history. Unlike them Vivekananda could devote short time for organizing Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission but their growth even after one hundred years is remarkable. This points to the vitality of Sri Ramakrishna's legacy which Vivekananda tried to translate into action.[10]

Third, Frederico Mayor, Director General of UNESCO, in his presidential address in 1993 expressed his amazement to see Vivekananda's commitment towards universalism and tolerance and his active identification with humanity as a whole. Mayor was struck by the similarity of the constitution of the Ramakrishna Mission which Vivekananda established as early as in 1897 with that of UNESCO drawn up in 1945. He admired the universality of the Ramakrishna movement centred round Sri Ramakrishna.

Fourth, Philip Goldberg's book *American Veda* (2010) shows how the ancient philosophy of Vedanta and the mind-body methods of Yoga have profoundly affected the world view of millions of Americans and radically altered the religious landscape. In the foreword Prof. Houston Smith observed, 'Vedanta quietly surfaces in the daily life of Americans. Yoga, Karma, meditation, enlightenment are now household words'. Thus the impact of Swami Vivekananda's ideas, which he inherited from his Master Sri Ramakrishna, can easily be appreciated by common men today.

Consequently, we see India has been freely receiving from the West the ideas and techniques for her material and economic progress and the West has been imbibing universal and spiritual ideas, which has been effecting a healthy transformation in their lives.

Sri Ramakrishna was unique. In the words of Max Müller, 'He was a clean original man'.[11] 'M.' believed God created all men and women making use of some moulds, but He created Sri Ramakrishna in His own hands. He lived a unique life. He did not preach any idea which he himself had not experienced.

Here is his brief life-sketch, pointing to some aspects of his personality as also some interpretation.

Gadadhar was born of Kshudiram Chattopaddhyaya and Chandramani Devi in 1936 in Kamarpukur, an obscure village 60 miles north of Kolkata. The child was christened Ramakrishna by his

father.[12] As a boy, he had aversion for formal education, but showed qualities of head and heart which made him popular among all irrespective of age, caste and social status. He showed high spiritual sensibility even at a tender age. Kshudiram's passing away in 1843 left his heart bruised. The boy became indrawn. At the age of nine, when he was invested with sacred thread, he showed his firmness for truth, a quality he inherited from his father. Violating the caste rule he shocked many by accepting his first alms from a low caste woman in keeping with his promise. Prevalent caste rule did not permit the Brahmin boy after his sacred-thread ceremony to continue studies in the company of boys of lower caste. His orthodox belief rebelled against his elder brother Ramkumar's accepting a priest's job in Dakshineswar Kali temple installed by Rani Rashmoni, a low caste wealthy landlord. It seems about this time he made a short visit to Kamarpukur via Antpur when his mother helped him to resolve the mental crisis. That he had already developed a fascination for Mother worship also helped him no doubt.

But how could he develop liking for mother-worship? For more than nine years, he had worshipped the family deity Raghuvir, a synonym for Lord Rama. Perhaps, to explain this inexplicable transformation in Ramakrishna, Romain Rolland used the expression 'The sting of Kali' – it was Goddess Kali who took possession of the spiritual aspirant in Sri Ramakrishna.

We may recall that in the family worship room Raghuvir, a Shivalinga, and an earthen pot, representing goddess Shitala, were installed by his father. Goddess Shitala was occasionally worshipped. Also his father had a vision of Mother Shitala in the form of a girl of about eight or nine. Besides, Sri Ramakrishna narrates an unusual experience of his at the age of eleven on his way to Anur Vishalakshi temple in the company of some women devotees. While he was walking across a paddy field, he saw something. He was overwhelmed. Later on he came to know that he had been

unconscious and his body had been totally motionless. He said, 'Since that day I have been an altogether different man.'[13] He was besieged by the spirit of Mother Goddess.

Unique was his approach to spiritual practices which spread over about twelve years. He was motivated by a passion for God that filled him. He overcame hindrances on the way to his goal of God realization, showed his ingenuity as well as firm-determination. His was a concrete and direct experience and he could affirm, 'I actually see God more clearly than I see you.' By realizing God, he attained freedom from all kinds of fetters and thereafter he felt he was ever free, ever blessed, ever eager to share bliss with others.

He advanced further in spiritual practices following scriptures and Gurus leading to his scientific verification of religious plurality based on his direct experience. He boldly asserted that God is real, God can be realized, and God realization is the ultimate goal of human life. He pointed out that if someone introspects he will find that the innermost longing in his heart is for complete freedom, unalloyed joy and it can be fully satisfied by realizing God. Thus Sri Ramakrishna turns the human mind from growing secularism to spiritual idealism. And thus he helps modern man to make life meaningful. From his own experiences he declared that all religious paths were valid in their separate ways, and that each path eventually led to God. Further, he came out with his discovery that Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Saktas, Saivas, Vaishnavas, Brahmajnanis of old tradition and those of present time, are striving for the ultimate truth. Devotees call him by different names. He declared, 'As many faiths, so many paths.'

Commissioned by Divine Mother he moved to accomplish a mission – to spread the universal message of harmony of religions, divinity of man and everything else and solidarity and unity of existence. As a corollary to this he advocated service of God in man – particularly the poor and marginalized who deserve

society's attention. Several critics contested this, even accusing Swami Saradananda of grafting this idea to incorporate Swami Vivekananda's idea of service which he alleged to have had picked up from Christian Missionaries. Again, Sumit Sarkar complains that while *Kathamrita* presents Ramakrishna telling Sambhu Mallick denouncing organized philanthropy no less than six times, it was totally excised from the *Lilaprasanga*.[14]

From the age of thirty nine, Sri Ramakrishna remained immersed in the divine mood until the end of his life. During this period all of his actions were transformed into new and extraordinary events by the will of the Divine Mother.[15] Sri Ramakrishna had a fall and got his hand fractured and on 2 February 1884 the injured hand was bandaged. Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Since my arm was injured a deep change has come over me. I now delight only in the Naralila, the human manifestation of God.'[16] 'Man is Narayana himself. If God can manifest Himself through an image, then why not through man also?'[17]

At about this time one day in 1884 Narendranath heard the Master say in an ecstatic mood, 'Why compassion? It means condescension. Not compassion, but serving your fellow-beings in the spirit of serving God.' An eye witness, Vaikunthanath Sanyal, recorded this incident in his book *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilamrita* (1343, p. 133).

Swami Vivekananda later elaborated: 'Man is the highest temple of God'. He also showed that working for humanity, trying to see God in all, is a distinct spiritual discipline. Sri Ramakrishna's and also his disciple Swami Vivekananda's idea that men are verily manifestations of God on earth, has opened up to reshape human relationships and man's dealings with his fellow beings.

Another idea of the Master that there is always hope for the householder is quite popular. To realize God a householder need not forsake family life. He has, however, to get rid of his infatuation or

weaknesses. Sri Ramakrishna encouraged householders saying that it was convenient to struggle for moral and spiritual life from within the walls of family life that serves as a fortress. He used to advise, 'With one of your hands engage in worldly activity and with the other hold on to God.'

The *Gospel* is full of practical advises for householders and renunciates, men and women. By way of illustration, I mention only two. In answer to some query of Trailokya Sanyal, Sri Ramakrishna said about pretentious charity of many householders. He said, 'Just see, what wonderful charity people practice. You talk about charity and kindness! A worldly man spends thousands of rupees for his daughter's marriage. Yet, all the while his neighbours are dying of starvation, and he finds it hard to give them two morsels of rice; he calculates a thousand times before giving them even that. The people around him having nothing to eat; but what does he care about that?'[18]

Another example: renunciation is dispassion for the world along with longing for God. To make it a point, Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Afflicted with miseries at home, one may put on the ochre cloth of a monk; but that renunciation doesn't last long. Again, a man out of work puts on an ochre wearing-cloth and goes off to Benares. After three months he writes home: 'I have a job here. I shall come home in a few days. Don't worry about me.' Again, a man may have everything he wants. He lacks nothing, yet he does not enjoy his possessions. He weeps for God alone. That is real renunciation.'[19] The Master's emphasis is on sincere practice and not *parroting* the words of ancestors thinking it to be religion. We may recall Swami Vivekananda's observation in his letter addressed to E. T. Sturdy. He wrote 'Ramakrishna had given us one great gift, the desire, and the lifelong struggle not to talk alone, but to live the life.' [20]

It was May 1885. He suffered from pain in his throat and it was

later diagnosed to be cancer. Every kind of medical treatment failed. On 16 August 1886 one of the most glorious life in the spiritual history of mankind had come to an end.

Sri Ramakrishna is the mainspring from which the Ramakrishna movement emerged. It was his words, with never-ending metaphors and analogies, that energised his message and it is the spirit of the legacy that needs to be cultivated while we learn what to know, what to do, how to live with others and also learn how to be, in today's fast changing world.

Building on the faith of his preceptor Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda found that all religions lead to the same divinity. Swami Vivekananda discovered that all religions have certain common grounds 'however different their claims' may be. Thus historian Sabyasachi Bhattacharya concluded saying Vivekananda offered a kind of theistic universalism as the path to India's unity.[21] This boosted nationalistic movement in the nineteenth century.

Sri Ramakrishna was an ideal monk; he was a model householder – an ascetic householder. His was a god-centric life. He had experience of both the temporal and the transcendental realities. His ideas are more relevant today than they were during his time. As mentioned in the beginning, Sri Ramakrishna as also his ideas are not only unique and quite relevant, they are indispensable for the people of today.

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Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Religious Life in Nineteenth Century Bengal

"God is manifest in every being but most so in man. To be born a man is no easy matter for man alone can think of God and of the Infinite as no other living creature of this world can."

– Sri Ramakrishna

Amiya Prosad Sen

Opening Remarks: The dilemma of the historian

The task of situating Sri Ramakrishna within the religious life of modern Bengal has to partly rest upon our understanding of what Ramakrishna himself took religion to be and it is precisely here that a historian such as I is immediately confronted with acute methodological difficulties. First, as against the historicist idea of a religion evolving over time and space, Sri Ramakrishna believed that it emanated from God, not human social experience. It is precisely upon this idea of the authorship of religions belonging to God and not man, that the saint also rested his repeated warnings against men making truth claims. If man was not the author of religions or religious values, how could he possibly be self-righteous about them? Second, unlike a historian or even more generally, a social scientist, Ramakrishna would not see religions from the outside or subject them all to the same methods of analysis. On the contrary, religions, as he understood them, had always to be understood from the inside, using idioms or idiosyncrasies that each preferred. Evidently, this puts Sri Ramakrishna's religious eclecticism on an altogether different level. The modern academic discourse of 'comparative religion'

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would have been an anathema to him for the simple reason that in his understanding, no two religions could be compared using heuristic categories originating outside these in some culturally sterile zone. Secularity, in other words, could not be the judge of religions. For Sri Ramakrishna, then, all religions had to be taken in their totality, not selectively such as a 'comparative' framework would demand. This brings me to my final point. Ramakrishna is known to have understood religion as *sanatana,* conventionally taken to suggest something fixed and unchanging. Needless to say, this goes against the very grain of historicism which, ipso facto, has to understand phenomenon within the twin frameworks of continuity and change. If anything, modern academic discourse has only further accentuated the conflict between the two positions. As a student I recall having read a work by the historian P. J. Marshall who spoke of the British 'discovery' of Hinduism; more recently, scholars prefer to speak of a Hinduism that was entirely 'imagined'.[1] Was the life and work of Sri Ramakrishna a part of this tendentious 'imagination'? Or would it be fairer to say that his understanding of religion rested on conformity and acceptance, not imagination? Was Hinduism a mansion without a foundation or with a foundation so deep that led people to take timeless qualities for social innovation? This is not a question that I can answer in this short paper with any degree of competence. My more pressing concern here is to locate nodal points where differing perspectives on religion may constructively join one another, however briefly. Much of the way Sri Ramakrishna came related to contemporary Hindu-Bengali life was vitally conditioned by certain predispositions that each of these carried. Surely this is something that any historical account of the period must acknowledge even as the historian's craft cannot fully engage with them. For good or worse, history has to ultimately fall back on the use of labels and categories, however nuanced these are made out to be. On the other hand, as I am only too well aware, the esoterically dexterous religious vocabulary of Sri Ramakrishna cannot always be invested with empirically verifiable meanings.

Religion better accommodates the liminal than history but while in religion, silence itself is pregnant with meaning; history, in order to be meaningful, has to compulsively speak for itself.

Setting the agenda

This first part of this paper attempts an overview of some major intellectual and cultural trends that surfaced in nineteenth century Bengal and closely examines the place that religion came to occupy within it. My focus here is on the way modern Hinduism in Bengal was conceived and constituted. Evidently, this occurred over several stages. Initially, older religious ideas and practices began to be critically re-examined within the framework of an enlivening social and philosophical discourse originating in the contemporary West. At this point in time, the self-understanding of the new Hindu intelligentsia in Bengal clearly leaned on the side of reformism and on occasions, resulted in a thoughtless surrender of older cultural values and initiatives. Thereafter, as it occurs to me, the Hindu mind became more inwardly reflexive, trying to re-articulate its most cherished thoughts in a manner that was more measured. Eventually, reformism also turned back upon itself, leading to a hardening of attitudes and at times, a somewhat reactionary attachment to older values and categories of thought. In current historical literature, this has often been identified as Hindu 'Revivalism', somewhat loosely I have to say, for, historically, reform and revival were never rigidly set apart. Several nineteenth century reformers employed an essentially revivalist posture in as much as they believed that the purity and authenticity of a religious tradition was directly proportionate to its historically established age. However, the term 'revival', as it was used in nineteenth century literature as also more recently, has also been misconstrued. The noted scholar, Tapan Raychaudhuri found the expression 'Hindu Revivalism' inept since Hinduism itself, in his opinion, was far from dead.[2] Here, Raychaudhuri's reading of revival as a return or replication of the past is problematic both

semantically and historically. For one, only the dying may be revived, not the dead. But more importantly, an unqualified replication of the past, I imagine, would have defeated the revivalist agenda itself. Even the most reactionary elements within the revivalist camp did not seek to bring back the eight varieties of marriage allowed in the medieval *smriti* literature, some of which truly underline a degree of social and sexual freedom for the woman. To the best of my knowledge, no one in modern Bengal sought to reinforce the taboos of untouchability even when defending varna and social hierarchy. Ironically, when some orthodox Hindu missionaries and scholars claimed to have discovered the marvels of modern science in ancient Hindu discourses, they did so under the inspiration of modern European ideas, not the traditionally Indian. In a sense, to locate the modern in antiquity was very different from trying to suggest that elements of antiquity were still relevant for the modern age. 'Revival', then, was essentially a selective reading and appropriation of the past. And however haltingly, it carried with itself, an acceptance of change. The truly characteristic quality of late nineteenth century Bengali culture as against the euphoria and excitement of the preceding years was not simply a 'backward looking revivalism' but greater self-reflexivity and a deepening sense of loss in relation to the world that was being fast eroded and re-fashioned by a new set of social and cultural values.

In part, this was the function of burgeoning Hindu nationalism, – of a new India desperately trying to cling on to elements of the old and scoffing at what was taken to be intrusions effected by a wholly alien culture. But that apart, there was also serious introspection and concern at the manner in which traditionally established ways of life had come to be critiqued and overturned. In 1882, upon meeting Sri Ramakrishna, at Dakshineswar, Mahendranath Gupta, the Calcutta School-teacher with Brahmo antecedents, was indeed startled to hear that the saint, whose wisdom had so impressed young graduates of Calcutta, had no use for books or that Truth could be open-ended.

For a man like Gupta, brought up to believe in texts and certitudes, this must have been both unsettling and shocking.[3] It raised doubts about whether human wisdom was always socially acquired and not innate or inborn. Could it be that the social environment always ruled over the outer self and not the inner, he might have wondered. A few years later, as I recall, no less a man than Swami Vivekananda was to similarly unsettle Hindu opinion by suggesting that a man's deepest spiritual experiences came not through a mastery of canonical texts but intuitive realization (*anubhava*). It occurs to me that in so suggesting, the Swami went beyond both western analytical philosophy and the Indian episteme, conventionally located in the *shastras*. This was going beyond both Acharya Shankara for whom liberation had to be based on the knowledge of esoteric *shruti* and the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, deeply rooted in empiricism.

In hindsight, it would be reasonable to say that within the so called 'Bengal Renaissance', the most productive and innovative areas were literature and religion. By comparison, contemporary Bengali achievements in art, architecture, music or socio-political theory look rather meager. The Bengali novelist, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94) once remarked, perhaps in a mood of self-recrimination, that Hindus looking for aesthetically more appealing icons of Radha and Krishna should procure them from Europe.[4] All the same, I fear I may be arguing against the reigning historical discourse when I say that for the greater part of the nineteenth century, Hindu self-definition was deeply rooted in religion. This has often been attributed to British Orientalism which appears to have inherited and further accentuated European perceptions about the Orient being quintessentially other-worldly and mystical. However, even those Indian thinkers who expressed serious disagreement with the nature and content of Orientalist researches also came around to the same conclusion. Bankim Chandra himself found the word 'religion' untranslatable into an Indian language, for,

rather than stand outside society and be objectified, religion was found to permeate the very interstices of Hindu social and cultural life. "With other peoples, religion is only a part of life; there are things religious and there are things lay and secular", he wrote in his *Letters on Hinduism*, "To the Hindu, his whole life was religious. To the European, his relations to God and to the spiritual world are things sharply distinguished from his relations to man and to the temporal world. To the Hindu, his relations to God and his relation to man, his spiritual life and his temporal life, are incapable of being so distinguished".[5] Bankim's predicament, I might add, is actually anticipated in the writings of Raja Rammohun Roy (1774-1833). For Rammohun, the heuristic categories were not so much the 'religious' and the 'secular' as 'good religion' versus the 'bad'. Though transforming himself fairly rapidly from a Mughal style aristocrat into a modern day liberal-cosmopolitan, the Raja did not really believe that a separation of the secular pursuits of life from the religious as effected especially in western Europe, could be replicated in India. Though a great admirer of revolutionary France and of Napoleon, one seriously doubts if he also concurred in their attacks on organized religion and the church.

In the annals of modern Bengal and in the narratives later produced by historians, radical and sensational critiques of religion or religious life have somehow been better retained in public memory than the subsequent revitalization of religious life. There is, at least in some quarters, a romantic excitement attached to the way in which Derozians disdainfully severed their connections with parental society and to the confession made by one among them (Madhav Chandra Mullick) stating his unmitigated loathing for Hinduism. Historical accounts of this period also bring forth the cynicism of the reformer-philanthropist, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) who, reportedly, thought poorly of Hindu philosophers and found God an impotent character, powerless to stop the cruelty and injustice perpetrated by men upon fellow men. Here it might

be also important to recall the skepticism of Akshay Kumar Dutt (1820-86) who disputed the very idea of Revelation and persuaded Brahmos to renounce their faith in Vedic authority. Maharshi Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) the leader of the Brahmos at the time, was no less scandalized by the attempt made by certain members (Akshay Kumar included) of the Tattwabodhini Sabha to put the very existence of God to vote!

Arguably, the sensationalism underlying these ideas and acts obscures the view that nineteenth century Bengal also witnessed a remarkable deepening and expansion of religious life. Here one may justly recall the ecstatic spiritual communion of the Maharshi himself, well versed as he was in both Hindu and Islamic mysticism; the eloquence and religious imagination of Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-84) and the birth of the neo-Vaishnav movement, beginning with Bankim Chandra himself. For all his anthropological researches into the evolution of world religions and the tendency to read history into the unfolding of religious life, Bankim believed that a religion that did not accommodate the existence of God and His Providence was an imperfect religion, if not also an incomplete one.[6] This was the sum of his disagreement with the Positive Religion of Auguste Comte to which he was attracted for a time. But perhaps more telling was the near existentialist question that troubled men like Narendranath Dutta (the later Vivekananda) about whether or not God and religion were real and tangible things that could be actually 'seen' and 'felt'. My readers will recall that this was a question that came to rest only subsequent to a meeting with Sri Ramakrishna.

It is within this complex cultural world of faith and doubt, acceptance and resentment that we must place and attempt to understand the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. Suffice to say here that it was he who smoothened out certain incipient tensions within Hindu-Bengali religious life, not synthetically, but through a constructive bridging of minds. It is he who appears to have

completed the movement away from deism, with its concept of a distant and disinterested god to a vibrant theism where god and man were intimately related to one another. This seemed to give a new meaning and direction to life, connecting god, man and history in one continuum. Importantly enough, this renewed emphasis on theism as identified with Ramakrishna also accomplished two other major feats.

First, it rejected self-righteousness and bigotry within contemporary religious life. Second, it perceptibly reduced the chasm dividing two seemingly contrary ideas of God: an impersonal abstraction and as a sensuous object of human adoration. On his second meeting with Ramakrishna, Mahendranath Gupta was baffled at the saint's insisting that God could be both *nirakar* and *sakar,* formless and yet endowed with form. For Ramakrishna this was perfectly plausible if only for the reason that it was humanly impossible to comprehend what God could or could not be. Indeed, his parables and preaching consistently speak of the indivisibility of the Impersonal (Brahman) and the Personal (Kali). Brahman was Kali and Kali, Brahman, and knowing one, as he put it, one knew the other. [7]

Critical Debates in Modern Hinduism

An overview of nineteenth century Bengal enables us to detect several debating points within modern Hinduism of which this paper will examine a few. First, there is the issue of whether or not religions had to be judged by considerations of function and utility. Evidently, this was a question that agitated Rammohun and pushed him towards a somewhat extreme position. The Raja was sharply critical of certain ideas and practices which, he believed, had sullied the good name of Hinduism. Rammohun shared with the evangelists, the 'horrors' of Hindu image worship, of wily priest-craft and a deep concern at the 'puerile' moral lives that legends and folk-lore attached to the 'licentious' Krishna and other puranic deities. Such gods, allegedly, could not set the right moral examples

for man. However, he also went beyond such commonplace criticism by taking a rather instrumentalist view of religion and religious life. In his well known letter to an English friend and sometime his employer, John Digby, Rammohun argued that only such a religion would be socially relevant and acceptable as was able to secure for the people, their 'political advantage and social comfort'[8]. Elsewhere too he can be seen to argue on the lines of a crude religious materialism. "A votary of God obtains his desired objects", he wrote in his translation of the *Mundaka Upanishad* (III.1.9), "anyone desiring honour and advantage shall revere him"[9]. For the *vedantin* Rammohun and especially when claiming to follow the spiritual lineage of Shankara, this was an astonishingly inept statement to make, for, if anything, advaita vedanta was strongly transcendentalist and non-utilitarian in its approach to God and religion. The idea of religion being made to serve certain social objectives also appears in the writings of the novelist Bankim Chandra. His *Dharmatattwa* (1888) opens with the eudemonistic concern for securing human happiness. Even though in his later years Bankim grew increasingly wary of utility as determining the worth of religion, this was more effectively negated only by Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Both considered God-realization the most natural and highest objective in human life. For Ramakrishna, religion was an end in itself and never a means and Vivekananda dealt a telling blow to the older theory by arguing that something as eternal and immutable as God or Religion could not possibly be judged from the perspective of society, which, by its very definition, was temporal and subject to change. "We are asked what good is your religion to your society", he complains at one place, "Society is made the test of Truth. Now this is very illogical. Society is only a stage in the growth which we are passing (through)... society is good at a certain stage but it cannot be an ideal; it is constant flux".[10]

A second debating point that comes alive in the pages of the *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* was that between a God-centered

theism and Natural Religion. The debate, as many would recall, took place (on 6th December, 1884) between Ramakrishna and Bankim Chandra at the residence of Deputy Magistrate, Adhar Lal Sen, a friend of Bankim and Ramakrishna devotee. Three related and meaningful issues were taken up and debated on the day.

In the first place, there was the question of whether or not God could be best approached through His works. In other words, was it more useful to know the world (as a creation) sufficiently before advancing towards knowledge of God as creator? Ramakrishna himself tried to settle this debate by using the analogy of an ordinary man seeking acquaintance with the rich and powerful patron. Was the seeker to first learn of the rich man's assets before he met the man himself or was it that upon meeting the man he would come to naturally learn of his various assets? Now whereas Ramakrishna argued that an acquaintance with the Creator ipso facto led to familiarity with His creation, Bankim, in line with Natural Theology of contemporary Europe argued quite the opposite. Differences also arose over whether for a man who could spare some money, wealth could be constructively used for charity and social service. On the day, Bankim was reportedly taken aback at Sri Ramakrishna's reducing money to something as useless as a lump of clay. But here he may have misunderstood the saint's intentions. Ramakrishna's discomfiture was not with money itself but with the ego and worldly embroilment that it induced. Again, he was not against the idea of charity or social service per se but doubted if this could be carried out in a spirit of true selflessness.

A third controversy broke out over the role and the spiritual efficacy of the guru. Here, as the *Kathamrita* reveals to us, Bankim was at his cynical best, painting the guru as the self-seeking figure who (to use Bankim's analogy) kept the best mangos for himself and passed on the rotten fruit to the disciples![11]

Prima facie, this too appears to be a somewhat uncharitable

reading of Ramakrishna. Evidently Bankim's cynicism and censure reflects portrayals of the guru appearing in early nineteenth century satires as in Kali Prosonno Singha's *Hutom Penchar Noksha* (1862). This overlooks Ramakrishna's persistent reluctance to assume the role of the guru. For one, the saint believed that this entailed taking upon oneself, the sins incurred by the disciple but more importantly, the worthy guru, in his understanding, was not a self-proclaimed counselor but a man carrying a divine mandate. This was precisely the cause of his unhappiness with what he called 'sign-board preachers': people who falsely appropriated to themselves religious knowledge and authority that could follow only from God's grace.[12]

Sri Ramakrishna and Bengali Religious life: Reappraisal

Of late, cultural historians of nineteenth century Bengal have tried to suggest new ways of looking at the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. Understandably, this places great emphasis on the social and cultural milieu within which these were enacted. However, the substance of what they suggest is not unqualifiedly acceptable.

First, there is the view that in the 1880s, the popularity of Sri Ramakrishna may be attributed not so much to any inherent quality underlying his life and message but in its reflecting certain pressing social anxieties of the day. In this view, Dakshineswar becomes the rallying point for members of the Calcutta genteel society, made increasingly aware of their powerlessness and subaltern status as also for men employed as petty clerks seeking release from the very ignominy of their everyday lives. The *Kathamrita* itself has sometimes been seen not so much as faithful reporting of the saint's preaching and parables as a manipulative appropriation of the same by a politically sensitized class seeking to articulate its own counter-discourse.[13]

Admittedly, there is some substance to these claims. It cannot be entirely fortuitous that Ramakrishna's favourite analogy in explaining

the pining for God-realization was the anguish of the unemployed clerk (*kerani)*. Some passages in the *Kathamrita* also reveal a purposive reading of the Master's message and a tacit engagement with raging cultural and philosophical debates at the turn of the nineteenth century.

On the other hand, criticism of the kind referred to above fails to give religion an autonomy and adequate space. Now while there may indeed have been a good number of clerks and lower middle class professionals for weekly gatherings at Dakshineswar, not all of them, I imagine, were consciously transporting themselves to a romanticized, make-believe world of folk innocence or gathering there to give vent to their exasperations born of domestic discord or problems at the work-place.[14] More importantly, when considered from the perspective of Sri Ramakrishna himself, the religious message that he disseminated could have actually done without the ubiquitous *kerani.* In essence, it was directed not at some social class but at the *samsari* (the man implicated in the world and worldliness), a category that truly transcends caste, class and gender.[15]

Sri Ramakrishna was displeased with Vishwanath Upadhyay, (an extremely well paid employee of the Royal Nepalese Durbar) for turning out to be a hen-pecked husband, utterly failing to overrule his wife's wishes.[16] Of the two human vices *kamini* and *kanchan* (the sensuous woman and wealth) that the saint repeatedly warned against, at least the first had little relation to one's social or financial standing. In Kaliyuga, all men fell subservient to the wishes of the woman and wife, complained Ramakrishna.

Incidentally, Ramakrishna also found doctors heartless and the legal profession trapped in servility (*dasatwa*), an idea that was to be quite forcefully reiterated in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*.

On the whole then, one may detect in Sri Ramakrishna, a new kind of guru who made no unreasonable demands on his devotees

and whose rustic simplicity accentuated by deep social insights and spiritual pining proved attractive to a variety of people troubled by recurring anxieties in their personal lives. To this must be added a sense of confidence that Ramakrishna instilled in men when it came to confronting the world. He asked them, for instance, not to be overburdened by a sense of guilt or sin, taught them to cope with wickedness in everyday life and the virtues of modesty. The *Kathamrita*, as I have found over repeated readings, copiously reveals the ways in which the saint addressed and seemingly resolved, recurring and commonplace problems with a touching kindness and grace. The gathering at Dakshineswar was indeed motley. Among people who can be found there are bereaved fathers, aged pensioners with thoughts about after life, old women and issueless widows suffering neglect at home, men betrayed by lovers, adolescents dreading the very thought of marriage and worldly entanglement and serious students of philosophy and religious practitioners of an ever increasing variety.[17] All such people, it would appear, found comfort and confidence in the charismatic presence of Ramakrishna. In overemphasizing the historical and cultural context of nineteenth century Calcutta, some recent accounts of Sri Ramakrishna and his religious world begin to look reductionist. For instance, they underplay the fact that among visitors to Dakshineswar were traditional Hindu scholars and *sadhus*, married women and young boys from local schools.

In Sri Ramakrishna we have possibly, the most well-known religious figure of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. In part, the saint's popularity followed from the missionary success of his famed pupil, Swami Vivekananda, who did much to highlight the religious passion and the catholicity of his guru and later institutionalized this through the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. The fact that the Swami himself was a guru to European and American disciples was a matter of celebration in India and produced a new pride of race. By the close of the nineteenth century, thanks to

the labours of C. H. Tawney and F. Max Müller, Sri Ramakrishna was a reasonably familiar figure within the English speaking world and such genuine interest may have indeed reinforced in many Hindus grandiose ideas of India spiritualizing a grossly materialist West. However that having been said, one must also look for explanations more directly related to the intrinsic value of the Master's message.

Arguably, there was little in the religious teachings of Ramakrishna that was entirely new or unique. The repeated warning against the temptations of *kamini* and *kanchan* was a part of a far older Brahminical discourse as was his preference for Kali worship and the Motherhood of God. Also, the narrative strategy that Sri Ramakrishna adopted of embellishing moral and religious truths with enchanting stories which proved a source of wonder and merriment to his numerous disciples is anticipated in the quasi-Vedantic work, the *Yoga-Vāshistha.* Ironically enough, the saint's followers often tried to tone down any uniqueness in the Master's message. On the contrary, they tried to locate it within a more continuous Hindu tradition. In the *Kathamrita* for instance, Mahendranath Gupta often finds in his guru's words, a resonance of the *Bhagavadgita.*

How then are we to understand or explain Sri Ramakrishna's distinctiveness as a religious figure? I have often thought hard on this problem but failed to come up with cogent or entirely satisfactory answers. It occurs to me nonetheless, that the key to his popularity lay in his passionate and single-minded pursuit of a spiritual life and god-realization. This is precisely what struck some of his more observant contemporaries and perceptive biographers. In my own short biography of the saint, I too have chosen to call him a 'sadhaka' (spiritual practitioner) even when in his own time and thereafter, he was widely acknowledged as a 'siddha' (spiritually perfect). To me it appears as though for Sri Ramakrishna, an ecstatic *vyakulata* (pining) was the quintessential form of self-expression and *sadhana,* a perennial enterprise which even personal salvation did not summarily end. On the contrary, if Ramakrishna is to be believed,

the responsibilities of a man so exalted in spiritual life increased manifold. *Sadhana* did not end with personal salvation, the saint maintained; rather, it made it incumbent upon the perfected soul to be even more committed to the spiritual needs of the larger humanity. "Some men will eat a mango and be content and wipe their faces clean", he observed, "while there are some who want to share the mango with others. Some men, after they have dug a well, will throw away the spade and basket, but you will find others who will carefully store them so that a neighbor can use them if necessary".[18] True saints were never self-seekers, Sri Ramakrishna maintained.

Another important aspect to his teachings is his valorizing the life of the *grihastha* (householder) in the context of a meaningful spiritual life. Here, he seems to have struck a balance between the anti-asceticism of Rammohun and Bankim on the one hand and the high value conventionally attached to a life of ascetic renunciation. Whereas the pious householder (*brahmanistha grihastha*) being equally qualified for a spiritual life is an idea strongly articulated in Rammohun too, Ramakrishna appears to have been more realistic in suggesting that given the social and moral pitfalls in *samsara*, this was more easily said than done. A quest for God-realization was not inconsistent with our daily lives; on the other hand, it was a trifle optimistic to claim that daily routines would not prove an exasperating distraction.[19]

Ramakrishna's advice to Mahendranath Gupta therefore, was to punctuate the routines of his everyday social life with periodic retreats to solitary *sadhana*, away from commonplace anxieties and allurements.[20] Note also Ramakrishna's insistence on a man's fulfilling all social and domestic obligations to his family and dependants before he took to *sanyas*.[21] This is precisely the reason why he would discourage such young men who happened to be the only child or son in the family from taking to a life of asceticism. Finally, *bairagya* (disinterested detachment from worldly matters) for Ramakrishna was not something that evolved naturally with time; more typically,

it appeared in a flash, quite unrelated to the travails of our daily lives. The true renouncer was one who renounced when amidst prosperity, not material want. *Bairagya* that came in the wake of some *samsaric* exasperation was never true *bairagya*, the saint warned.[22]

My last point here pertains to the justly famous catholicity of Sri Ramakrishna. In the first place it is important that we separate this both from Rammohun's textual celebration of religious universalism and the attempt later made by Keshub to synthetically fuse diverse religious ideas and symbols.[23] In Sri Ramakrishna's view, attempts to establish religious universalism on the basis of a text or upon a Universal Church were both likely to be sectarian and self-righteous since they were intimately bound up with authorship and ego. He, on the other hand, was prepared to accept all religions as they were, to treat them as so many languages which spoke of the same Truth, albeit with many voices. This was religious pluralism, not polytheism. In essence, the religious life and message of Ramakrishna underlines the idea that the Hindu-Brahminical world view was philosophically single but religiously diverse. It was this diversity that brought to religion *rasa* or aesthetic fulfillment.

It is only apt to end by returning to Ramakrishna's essentially a-historical reading of religion. Religious feeling was something that God instilled in man and made it an integral part of his Divine Play, not something that men and women consciously created themselves. Conflicting truth claims originated only in situations when man and not God was taken to have authored religions. On the other hand, acknowledging God and His Providence led men to greater kindliness and modesty. The life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna rightly remind us that religion was best sustained by humility.

Notes and References

1 P. J. Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*,

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970; Geoffrey A. Oddie: *Imagined Hinduism. British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism.* 1793-1900, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006

[2] Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered. Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 9

[3] For an apt and amusing story on the skepticism of the western educated man as narrated by Ramakrishna, see Amiya P. Sen edited and translated: *His Words: The Preachings and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa*, Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2010, p. 159. The story originally appeared in the third volume of the *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, Kathamrita Bhawan edition, pp. 268-69. Hereafter, I have relied largely on this collection for citations from Ramakrishna.

[4] Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, 'Letters in the Hastie Controversy', Reproduced in J. C. Bagal ed. *Bankim Rachanabali*, (hereafter BR), Vol. III. Calcutta. Sahitya Samsad, 1969, p. 216

[5] 'Letters on Hinduism', Ibid., p. 230

[6] Ibid., p. 238

[7] *His Words*, Op. cit., pp. 82, 86

[8] Rammohun's letter dated 18.1.1828 reproduced in *Rammohun Rachanabali* ed. Ajit Kumar Ghosh, Calcutta: Haraf Prakashan, 1973, p. 462

[9] *The English Works of Rammohun Roy* ed. Kalidas Nag and Debjyoti Burman, Vol. II, Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1946, p. 8

[10] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Mayavati Memorial Edition, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992, Vol. VI, p. 144

[11] Details of this controversy appear in Sri M.: *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, Calcutta: Kathamrita Bhavan, 1957 reprint, Vol. V (Appendix), pp. 62-82

[12] This criticism was directed equally at Brahmo leaders like Keshab and propagandists from the orthodox Hindu camp like Pandit Sashadhar Tarkachudamani.

[13] Two representative pieces, albeit with inner differences in approach and emphasis are Sumit Sarkar, 'The Kathamrita as a Text. Towards an Understanding of Ramakrishna Paramhamsa', Delhi: NMML, Occasional Papers on History and Society, No.XXII (mimeographed), 1985; 'Kaliyug, Chakri and Bhakti. Ramakrishna and His Times', EPW: 18 July 1992; *Writing*

Social History, Delhi: OUP, 1997; Partha Chatterjee, 'A Religion of Urban Domesticity. Sri Ramakrishna and the Calcutta Middle Classes' in *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. VII, Ed. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, Delhi: OUP, 1993.

[14] On a more non-serious note let me say how much I miss a second Mahendanath Gupta or one who could have been present all the time at Dakshineswar! It is anyone's guess as to how much richer the *Kathamrita* might have been as a source book but for the fact that it contains records of sermons and conversations that took place only on Sundays and public holidays.

[15] This is an argument that I take up in some detail in my *Three Essays on Sri Ramakrishna and His Times*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 2001, Essay II, III

[16] *Kathamrita*, Op. cit., Vol. IV, pp. 132-33

[17] Ibid., p. 76

[18] *His Words*, Op. cit., pp. 61-62

[19] *His Words*, Op. cit., p. 171

[20] Ibid., p. 174

[21] Ibid., pp. 168-69

[22] Ibid., p. 202

[23] In 1829, Rammohun produced a work called *The Universal Religion* where, surprisingly, the sources that he draws upon are nearly all Hindu-Brahminical. Keshab's syncretism took the form of the New Dispensation Church, an experiment that proved quite unpopular. This issue is dealt in some detail in Essay III of my *Three Essays* op. cit.

Sri Ramakrishna and His Times

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya

I propose to broaden the focus of my discussion from the personality and philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna, to a wider perspective which is indicated by the title of my paper, 'Sri Ramakrishna and His Times'. It may be asked, is it not enough to focus on that great personality? Why is it necessary to look at "his times"? In this paper I will try to answer that question, but to begin with I will offer one preliminary answer. I think that to view him in isolation is to miss the true explanation of his position in history and the reasons why his impact was so great in Bengal and indeed in India at large. As a historian my role should be to address that historical question. Since I have spent almost four decades outside of Bengal I have often seen evidence of that impact this Bengali sage had in other parts of India and abroad. What explains the enormous space Sri Ramakrishna came to occupy in many minds outside of Bengal?

I might add that in addressing my task in this paper I shall draw upon the scholarly work of many scholars, within the Order named after him as well as others, but I shall refrain from burdening this article with too many references to the scholarly writings. In any case, my chief source will be *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* and inevitably, the *Kathamrita.*

To begin with, I would like to remind you that controversies and intellectual debates which have died down today were very much part of the mental climate in Sri Ramakrishna's times. That is necessary because these intellectual conflicts in his times reveal the significance of the role he played as a pole star to many people

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in the midst of those conflicts. If we take out those conflicts, if we ignore them, we shall fail to understand the historical importance of his role. Before his times, Bengal witnessed the emergence of the first generation of English-educated Bengali *bhadraloks*, under the spell of H. L. V. Derozio of Hindu College. The Derozians leading the Bengal Renaissance were wedded to the rationalism of David Hume – indeed Derozio was removed from his position as a teacher in the college precisely because of that reason. However, the generation exposed to Humean ideas, often identified as 'atheism' and inimical to Hindu religion, continued to influence the educated Bengalis. The Society for the Propagation of General Knowledge (SPGK) was instrumented in preserving that trend.

Secondly, these early decades of the 19th century also witnessed the incursion of Christian missionary proselytization. In fact the Christian Missionary activities throughout India became a factor in promoting Indian resistance to British rule. The early colonial historians of the uprising of 1857, known to the British as the Mutiny, (like Bell, Kaye and Malleson) described that uprising as the Indian reaction to Christian Missionaries' drive to convert Hindus to the Christian faith.

While leaders of Hindu society perceived a threat in Western Humean radicalism on the one hand and Christian missionary incursions on the other in the decades immediately preceding the birth of Ramakrishna, and during his childhood and youth, there was also an implicit challenge in the spread of Rammohun Roy's *Brahmo Samaj*. Let us remember that when Ramakrishna was about thirty years of age the Adi Brahama Samaj was founded (1866), to be followed by the founding of the Bharatvarshyia Brahmo Samaj (1868) and Sadharan Brahmo Samaj (1878). In Western India the Brahmo Samaj influence was evinced by the founding of the Prarthana Samaj (1867). Dayananda Saraswati's Arya Samaj was founded (1875) at a time when Ramakrishna was already an established thought leader, aged about forty years. At any rate, the Arya Samaj had scarcely any influence in Ramakrishna's world; the influence of Brahmo Samajists was much stronger.

Thus those were turbulent times, when different faiths were contending with each other, ranging from atheism to 'reformist' Hinduism. Let us also not forget the non-religious thought movements of those times, specially the impact of Positivism on Ramakrishna's contemporaries. I have written elsewhere about the impact of Auguste Comte's ideas on the generation of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay; my contention was that Positivist ideas had spread through private studies and informal associations of the English-educated *bhadralok* and I documented that on the basis of the private correspondence of Richard Congreve in the Bodleian Library at Oxford.[1] While Humean radicalism had found for a while an institutional centre in the Hindu College and the SPGK, Comteism had no such institutional anchorage. But the influence was obvious in the acknowledged affiliation to Positivist ideas, as in the case of Krishna Kamal Bhattacharya (1843-1932) or Jogendra Chandra Ghosh as well as in the not so explicit influence seen in Bankim Chandra or Akshay Kumar Datta (1820-1886). Positivism implied critique of all established religions including Hinduism, but some of the Positivists in Bengal tried to reconcile it with Hinduism.

To sum it up, while Sri Ramakrishna was immersed in his spiritual quest, there was an intellectual turmoil in Bengal and indeed all those trends outlined above were perceived as threats by proponents of Hinduism. Among these proponents were younger contemporaries of Sri Ramakrishna like Chandra Nath Basu (1844-1910) and Sashadhar Tarkachudamani (1851-1928). Spokesmen of Hinduism in those days were in a running battle with what they perceived as the trends inimical to Hinduism: Derozian radicalism and Christian Missionary activities in earlier times, the Brahmo Samaj outlook and Positivism from the 1860s, and the general trend among numerous educated middle class individuals to stray away from the strait and narrow path of Hindu orthodoxy.

If this was the mental and moral climate in the life of Sri Ramakrishna, what was his approach to it? And what aspects of that approach attracted the young educated Bengali followers of Sri

Ramakrishna? These are the chief questions I propose to address.

First, I venture to suggest, the educated urban middle class youth might have been attracted by Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical reconciliation between the traditional faith in *Bhakti marga* and the pursuit of knowledge, *Jnana marga*. He conceded the autonomy of both *Jnana marga* and *Bhakti marga* as two distinct paths; however, intuitively he prioritized the latter. "*Jnana* and *Bhakti*, both are valid paths...The path of *jnana* is one of analysis. Continual analysis may sometimes lead to atheism. He who is faithful to the search for God does not give it up even under the influence of atheistic thoughts."[2] This openness to the path of *jnana* along with that of *bhakti* enabled a reconciliation between the cast of mind of the English educated middle class, which was influenced by European knowledge system with that part of the Bengali mind which was wedded to the traditional faith in the *Bhakti marga*. Thus one often sees a commingling of these two trends in the encounters and debates in Ramakrishna's circle.

The second remarkable characteristic of Sri Ramakrishna's life and teaching was the exposure of his evolving mind to various faiths and religious belief systems. The chronological story is not very clear but it appears that his spiritual experiences at Dakshineswar from 1855 onwards was followed by his association with Bhairabi Jogeswari of the Trantik School (1861-63) and thereafter with Totapuri of the Vedantic Monist School (1864-65). Sri Ramakrishna, it is well-known, also searched beyond the limits of Hinduism in the Islamic tradition (e.g. his association with Gobinda Ray, 1866) and Christanity (1873). Thus his famous words, "*Jata Mat Tata Path*", were not merely verbalization of an intellectual conviction but the product of personal religious experiences ranging though various sects and belief systems. Unlike many others in his community, he faced with an intuitive confidence other faiths and thus defused potential conflicts. The climactic moment in the evolution of this approach was Swami Vivekananda's declaration at the Chicago Parliament of Religions that the same truth resided in all religious believers' heart.

Thirdly, as Sri Ramakrishna attained fame as a religious thinker, he developed contact and sometimes close acquaintance with spiritual leaders in different parts of the country. The evidence of these contacts is scattered throughout the *Kathamrita*, particularly in his reminiscences. These spiritual personalities included Pandit Narayan Shastri of Rajasthan, Dayananda Saraswati of Panjub, Gouri Sankar Tarkabhushan of the Vaishnava sect, the north Indian sage Totapuri and, of course, similar personalities in Bengal such as Keshab Chandra Sen and Bijoy Krishna Goswami. Thus discussions and discourses in his circle at Dakshineswar, sometimes in his presence and sometimes in his absence, became a forum of many contemporary schools of thought in India of his times. In fact the most prominent ones among his early intellectual admirers were of the Brahmo Samaj. The early signs of recognition of Sri Ramakrishna were the tracts written by Keshab Chandra Sen, *Paramhamser Ukti* (1878) and by Pratap Chandra Majumdar who wrote the first biography of Ramakrishna in English entitled "The Hindu Saint" in the *Theistic Review* (1879).

Finally, a message specific to Ramakrishna's approach was a social message. This was highlighted by his disciple of Swami Vivekananda and formed the basis of missionary activities which often exceeded the prescriptions of traditional faith. The sociologist Professor Benoy Sarkar put this exceedingly well on the occasion of the centenary celebration of Sri Ramakrishna's birth in 1936: "In his sociology or metaphysics of values *jiva* (man) is equal to *Shiva* (God). The formulation of this equation by Ramakrishna enables us to establish an identity between service to man and service to or worship of God. We are again and again rendered conscious that he was not constructing a 'kingdom that is not of this world'.... He was a teacher of worldly duties in the most emphatic sense."[3] This must have attracted the laymen for he addressed them on their worldly duties, whereas the customary thing for spiritual leaders was to focus on the other world in their discourse to their circle of converts. Further, this characteristic in Sri Ramakrishna laid the basis of the social service

orientation of the missionary activities which Swami Vivekananda developed from the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Among these four factors which I have outlined briefly, the first, the reconciliation of faith in devotion (*bhakti*) with commitment to the pursuit of knowledge was crucially important to the educated, young and old, in Ramakrishna's times. As we have noted earlier, on a number of occasions Sri Ramakrishna declared his belief that the path of knowledge (*jnana*) as well as the path of devotion (*bhakti*) run parallel towards the same end. For example: "*Jnana-yoga* is true, the path of *bhakti* is also true, they both lead to Him."[4] At the same time, he believed that pursuit of knowledge is not enough, "Mere pedantry is not enough." In a very long conversation he had with Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in August 1882, he expounded this view.[5] In several other sayings he appears to hold the view that the path of *bhakti* is the superior road to attain knowledge of God. On occasions he is known to have said that too much study of the *shastras* was of no use, what mattered was intense concentration of the mind on the path to God.[6] Or again, in his own individual idiom, he said, *bhakti* can go to the inner quarters (*andar mahal*), while *jnana* is limited to the outer quarters.[7] However, this view of his is not unqualified. For example, the following catechism in an exchange with a disciple: '"What do you like, *jnana* or *bhakti*?' ... 'Only *bhakti*'. ... 'If you do not have knowledge, how can you determine what should be the object of your *bhakti* ?'"[8] Swami Vivekananda firmly held the view that Sri Ramakrishna believed in a harmonious combination of *jnana* and *bhakti*. On 3 March 1894 he writes to his disciple Singaravelu Mudaliar, nicknamed by him 'Kidi': There is the danger that dependence on faith alone would "breed fanaticism....barring further progress", while *jnana* is open to the "danger of its becoming dry intellectualism". And Vivekananda concludes: "A harmony of all these is the thing required. Ramakrishna was such a harmony."[9]

Many European commentators have identified parallelism between the teachings of Ramakrishna and those of the Platonic

school in the pre-Christian age and the Christian mystic tradition represented by famous figures like St. Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, or St. John of the Cross. What was common between these schools of thought and, I venture to say Sri Ramakrishna, was perhaps the idea that beyond the rational approach there was a direct intuitive experience of the awareness of God and of the soul's union with God – which was the highest spiritual experience possible for the human soul in this life. It was perhaps this mystic state which Swami Vivekananda was searching for when he asked of his Guru, as it is so often recounted, 'have you seen God'?

One of the dangers the mystic is often exposed to, is the incomprehension of the uninitiated. Very often the mystic approach has been confused with the esoteric, the almost magical cults which claim supernatural miracles as the sign of success. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa was exceptional among the Indian spiritual thinkers in being critical of the 'miracle workers', i.e. the demonstration of the power of what Bengal used to know as the '*siddhai*' powers. Of the many instances of his contemptuous remarks about 'miracles' supposedly wrought by some practitioners of esoteric cults, one instance is memorable. One of his favourite disciples, Girish Chandra Ghosh, it was reported to him, hoped that his Guru's miraculous powers would cure his fatal illness. Ramakrishna said on this occasion: "To cure diseases, to help a litigant to get a favourable decision of the court of law, to walk on water – these are the powers [of the *siddhai*]. The true worshipper of God aims only at reaching out to Him." He went on to say that to crave for miracles "is like the guru becoming a prostitute. It is like selling oneself for wealth, for prestige among the common people, for bodily pleasures.... It is the degradation of one's own self for paltry things."[10] It is evident that it was his intense personal experience as a mystic thinker that turned him against the miracle game. The enlightened urbane Bengali of his times rejected belief in the miraculous for different reasons, but in their rejection of it the thoughts of the rationalist and the mystic coincided.

Swami Vivekananda reacted strongly against writings on Sri Ramakrishna which attributed all kinds of miraculous deeds to the departed Guru. In a letter to Alasinga in 1894 he wrote: "What nonsense about the miracle of Ramakrishna.... Miracles I do not know, nor understand.... These people want to know God who see in Sri Ramakrishna nothing but jugglery!"[11] Those who pretended to write about the life of his Guru, he said, tended to "distort his life and sayings". Again he wrote to Mudaliar, or 'Kidi', about the same stories of miracles: "Take thought, collect materials, write a sketch of the life of Ramakrishna *studiously avoiding all miracles*. The life should be written as an illustration of the doctrines he preached."[12]

When we consider the attitude of the Young Bengal, the 'English-educated', upper middle class, urban *bhadralok* to Sri Ramakrishna, we must take into account his medium: the earthy language of the common people, idioms which were distant from the chaste language of the educated crowd of Calcutta around him. Max Müller wrote in 1898: "It is quite true that Hindus who belong socially to higher classes, though not necessarily Brahmanas by birth, would be more careful in their expressions" than Sri Ramakrishna was. The latter's language sometimes contained expressions considered inappropriate by the former.[13] Max Müller goes on to say that "filthy language" is really a kind of "plain speaking among Oriental races", but there is "a great difference between what is filthy and what is meant to be filthy" – and he contrasts *Sringara-sataka* with Emile Zola's writings. In one respect we are compelled to differ from Max Müller; he remarked that Ramakrishna "did not know a word of Sanskrit" – but we have a good deal of contrary evidence in recorded conversations in *Kathamrita*. For example, Sri Ramakrishna quotes verbatim from *Adhyatma-Ramayana* a well-known passage, "*vachya-vachaka-bhedena twameva parameswara*".[14] There are other instances of this kind. But as a rule he did not recite Sanskrit *shlokas*, nor use in his discourse common *shastric* catchwords. He himself said that in his youth he had enough exposure to Sanskrit to understand the pandits and sadhus he met. He added that "sometimes [my knowledge of

Sanskrit] fails. If a pandit comes and speaks to me in Sanskrit I understand. But I cannot converse in Sanskrit."[15] To be a pandit was not his aim in life.

The question remains, why did he use occasionally a language which was not considered chaste by the contemporary intelligentsia. Perhaps the answer to that question is that he deliberately vernacularized his message. This vernacularization imparted to his discourse a nativist directness. After all his purpose was to reach out to the common people. In his conversations with the famous playwright Girish Chandra Ghosh, he commented on the term '*paramahamsa*'. Those whom we call *paramahamsa*, he said, are of two types: he who attains knowledge of God and, second, he who loves his fellow men. *Paramhamsa* of the first type says to himself, it is enough that I have attained knowledge, but the other kind of *paramhamsa* not only attains knowledge of God but also imparts that knowledge to every one.[16] It is possible that this role assumed by Sri Ramakrishna moulded the cultural approach, the medium, the language that he adopted with deliberation.

Allow me at the end to sum up. I have argued that our appreciation of the important role of Sri Ramakrishna in the history of Bengal will be incomplete unless we look at him in the context of his times. It was a turbulent period influenced by the heritage of David Hume's rationalism and Christian proselytization as well as contemporary ascendancy of Brahmoism and defensive reaction of Hindu conservatism. In this situation Sri Ramakrishna was able to gather around himself the educated middle class youth of Bengal as well as disciples from the other strata of society. They rallied around him, I suggest, because they were attracted by certain characteristics of his teachings. These characteristics were: (a) the reconciliation of the pursuit of knowledge with the path of devotion to divinity, (b) the recognition of the identical inner truth in all religions, (c) an openness to dialogues with various schools of thought and spiritual thinkers in Bengal and India at large, and (d) a bold assertion of the value of service to man and the worldly duties of laymen who

were addressed in a language they were familiar with. Although Sri Ramakrishna's life was primarily a spiritual quest, to consider him in isolation is to do an injustice to the historical role he played in the context of his times. However, perhaps what merits attention most about him is how he became the centre of a socio-cultural movement that affected the course of Bengal's history.

Notes and References

1 Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "Positivism in Nineteenth Century Bengal", in R. S. Sharma, ed., *Indian Society: Historical Probings*, New Delhi, 1974, pp. 337-355

2 Free translation from: Sri M., *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, Complete Edition, Ananda Publishers: Calcutta, 1983, p. 255; hereafter cited as *Kathamrita*, I have referred to this edition of *Kathamitra* in the following pages since it is a handy and comprehensive collection in one volume.

3 Benoy Sarkar, "Address to the Convention of Religions", April 1936, quoted in Haridas Mukherjee, *Benoy Sarkar and the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Movement*, Calcutta, 1988, p. 13

4 *Kathamrita*, p. 418

5 Ibid., pp. 411-425

6 Ibid., p. 478

7 Ibid., p. 506

8 Ibid., p.505

9 *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama: Calcutta, 1989, Vol. IV, p. 356, hereafter cited as *CWSV*, letter to 'Kidi', 3 March 1894

10 *Kathamrita*, p.522

11 *CWSV*, Vol. V, p. 53, Vivekananda to Alasinga, 30 November 1894

12 *CWSV*, Vol. IV, p. 359, Vivekananda to Kidi, 3 March 1894

13 F. Max Müller, *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings*, 1898, Reprint 2011, Advaita Ashrama: Kolkata, pp. 62-63

14 *Kathamrita*, p.560

15 Ibid., p.685

16 Ibid., p.496

Sri Ramakrishna and His Chief Disciple

Swami Tyagarupananda

The year 2011 marked the 175th birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna. Against this backdrop, it is time to remember that the message of the Master, Sri Ramakrishna, reached its fulfilment in his worthy disciple Swami Vivekananda, who could bring out the nuggets of gold which lay embedded in Sri Ramakrishna's apparently simple life and teachings. It was again Swamiji who could interpret the life of the Master without being dogmatic, for he could place the life of his guru in the wider canvas of the spiritual tradition of the country and the Hindu religion as a whole.

After attending the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago, Swamiji returned to India in 1897, where he delivered a number of lectures in different places of the country. At the Calcutta Address, one of the lectures he delivered during this period, he said:

> Brothers, you have touched another chord in my heart, the deepest of all, and that is the mention of my teacher, my master, my hero, my ideal, my God in life – Shri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. If there has been anything achieved by me, by thoughts, or words, or deeds, if from my lips has ever fallen one word that has helped anyone in the world, I lay no claim to it, it was his... Yes, my friends, the world has yet to know that man. We read in the history of the world about prophets and their lives, and these come down to us through centuries of writings and workings by their disciples. Through thousands of years of chiseling and modeling, the lives of the great prophets of yore come down to us; and yet,

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> in my opinion, not one stands so high in brilliance as that life which I saw with my own eyes, under whose shadow I have lived, at whose feet I have learnt everything – the life of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa.[1]

Thereafter, Swamiji compares the advent of Sri Ramakrishna to a tidal wave of spirituality:

> Ay, this boy born of poor Brahmin parents in an out-of-the-way village of which very few of you have even heard, is literally being worshipped in lands which have been fulminating against heathen worship for centuries. Whose power is it? Is it mine or yours? It is none else than the power which was manifested here as Ramakrishna Paramahamsa.[2]

He then goes on to establish his theory that every country has a central note around which the national life revolves. In England it is politics, in France it is the doctrine of liberty, while in India it is religion which lies at the centre of national life. It will be a tremendous error, he argues, if the nation suddenly decides to change its central character, it will be like a river which loses its path in the midst of a desert. He forcefully argues that the wonderful life of Sri Ramakrishna and its message must be placed before the Indian nation. As he said:

> If this nation wants to rise, take my word for it, it will have to rally enthusiastically round this name. It does not matter who preaches Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, whether I, or you, or anybody else. But him I place before you, and it is for you to judge, and for the good of our race, for the good of our nation, to judge now, what you shall do with this great ideal of life.[3]

Sri Ramakrishna was born to an orthodox Brahmin family in Kamarpukur, a remote village in Hooghly district of Bengal, in the year 1836. He spent his childhood in a rural setting, amidst the wonderful expanse of nature. He had an artistic bent of mind and

was adept in singing, acting and clay-modelling. At the age of ten, Gadadhar, as he was known in his childhood, lost his father. His elder brother, Ramkumar, became his natural guardian and took him to the city of Calcutta where he taught him Sanskrit at the tol which he had founded. Soon thereafter, Ramkumar joined the newly-established temple at Dakshineswar as its head-priest. Ramakrishna followed him to this temple located on the outskirts of Calcutta. Later, Ramakrishna had to take over the work of the priest of the temple of Bhavatarini, the main deity at Dakshineswar. It was this duty of ritualistic worship that opened the doors of spiritual practice for Sri Ramakrishna. The daily chores, while being performed with devotion, brought a spirit of enquiry in his mind –was there a conscious being who listened to the prayers of the devotee and partook of the offerings in the temple? This sincere enquiry soon turned into a burning passion, into a longing to realize the Divine Mother, whose formal worship he was performing in the temple. He became oblivious to the world around him, longing deeply for a vision of the Almighty.

It was during this time that the Brahmo Samaj was founded in Bengal and struck its root in the minds of the educated men of the country. It was a religious organization which believed in a formless god and considered the practice of worship of an image as a product of superstition. Western philosophy and religion arrived along with the English rulers and stood as impediments to the ancient Eastern beliefs about god and religion. The scientific and industrial revolution in England had ignited a utilitarian and scientific outlook towards life; the spirit of science now questioned the very existence of god. Calcutta, the then capital of British India, stood as the bowl where the admixture of cultures, of the East and the West, took place. It was from this place, again, that the renaissance in Bengal, and ultimately in India, started.

The Brahmo Samaj drew its teachings from the Upanishads and external forms from Christianity. The young educated men of the

day were attracted to this organization which vowed to cleanse contemporary Hinduism of the dross of superstition and bigotry. In addition to religion, the Samaj inspired a number of social reforms and the creative talents of poets, litterateurs and artistes. But its religious sermons were largely pedagogic. Further, the Samaj did not go into the core aspect of religion viz. realization of God.

It is in search of spiritual realization that Narendranath Dutta, then a young college student of General Assembly's Institution (currently the Scottish Church College) came to Sri Ramakrishna. He was born in a Kayastha family. His father was an attorney who practiced at the court but was without belief in an organized religion. But his mother was deeply religious and it was under her influence that Narendranath was attracted to the religious life. Even in his college days, Narendranath would frequent the Brahmo Samaj. He had a strong physique and had a number of qualities which made him a natural leader among men. Having learnt vocal music from professional singers, he was a regular performer at different sessions of the Brahmo Samaj. Simultaneously, the exposure to Western philosophy and logic in his college developed in him the spirit of rationality. The spirit of enquiry thus aroused led him to ask a fundamental question – did God really exist? Can He be seen?

William Hastie was then the Principal of General Assembly's Institution, the college at which Narendranath was studying the undergraduate course. He had mentioned the name of Sri Ramakrishna while teaching a poem composed by William Wordsworth – here was a person who was so deeply immersed in the thought of the Divine, the Principal argued, that he lost all thought of himself.

The young Narendranath was later invited to sing at the house of Ramchandra Dutta, who lived in the close vicinity, when Sri Ramakrishna paid a visit there. The people of Calcutta had also learnt about the Paramahamsa (Ramakrishna) when Keshab Chandra Sen the Brahmo leader, wrote about him in the Indian Mirror.

In course of time the youthful Narendranath started visiting Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. During his very first visit to the saint, Narendranath asked the question, "Can God be realized?" The answer to this was crisp, "Yes, certainly He can be seen, in a more intimate fashion than I see you now. But who wants to realize Him? Men shed profuse tears for their wives and sons; but who indeed, weeps for Him!" It was a direct and startling reply about the existence of God from a man of realization; there was no display of empty scholarship, no attempt at intellectual jugglery. The atheistic doubt which gnawed at the heart of Narendranath was at last calmed. It was as if that the modern youth, represented by Narendranath, armed with the knowledge of the latest Western rational philosophy, met its match in a man of realization and immaculate purity.

The next five years helped Narendranath blossom into the future Swami Vivekananda. His father Viswanath Dutta passed away during this time, forcing him to look for some way to earn a decent living. The insensitivity and cruelty of the world were then revealed to the idealistic Narendranath –there seemed to be no one whom he could look up for help and support. During these difficult times, the unselfish love and sympathy of Sri Ramakrishna won him over, it soothed his various afflictions. But it was not only this emotional bondage which drew Narendranath to his guru, Sri Ramakrishna. It was also his impeccable character which attracted Narendranath like a magnet –the purity and sympathy for all and sundry was the hallmark of Sri Ramakrishna's character –something which Narendranath marveled at. The rebellious streak in him did not allow him to bow unconditionally at the feet of his Master, in later days he would tell Sister Nivedita, "I fought my Master for six long years, with the result that I know every inch of the way! Every inch of the way!"[4]

The last nine months of Sri Ramakrishna, when he was diagnosed with cancer, were spent at Cossipore on the outskirts of Calcutta. His young disciples, led by Narendranath, left their hearth and

home to serve their guru. This opportunity to stay in the company of such an elevated soul left a deep impression on these educated youths who had a deep desire for spiritual life. Soon, they formed a close band blessed with the love and affection of the Master. It was as if that the wealth of spiritual treasures which Sri Ramakrishna had earned was being bequeathed to his spiritual children. Among these young men again, he had the greatest faith in Narendranath – for his courage, intelligence and a love for a pure life. It was thus that he entrusted Narendranath, primarily, to carry forward his mission to the world at large.

The Parliament of Religions was held at Chicago in 1893. At this grand world stage, the listeners were compelled to look up with awe at Swami Vivekananda who declared the divinity of man and the harmony of all religions. Every human being is manifestation of the Divine, he argued. Within every one lies the Atman –the pure, the eternal – and it is through its manifestation that a person undertakes the journey of life. All religions again, lead to the same God:

> As per the diverse tastes, men take various paths in life – crooked or straight. All these in end, lead up to thee –like the different rivers all converging to the same ocean.[5]

It was this message of universal acceptance, not toleration alone, which marked out Vivekananda as the harbinger of peace and harmony, as the grand unifier of the Eastern and Western outlooks towards life. But it was to Sri Ramakrishna whom he looked up to for inspiration while declaring the underlying oneness of all religions:

> Ay, long before ideas of universal religion and brotherly feeling between different sects were mooted and discussed in any country in the world, here, in sight of this city, had been living a man whose life was a Parliament of Religions as it should be.... One thing we are to remember that it was the purest all lives that you have ever seen, or let me tell you distinctly, that you have ever read of. And before you is the

> fact that it is the most marvelous manifestation of soul-power that you can read of, much less expect to see.[6]

The different spiritual disciplines that Sri Ramakrishna undertook vindicated the veracity of the different religions of the world; it also established the underlying harmony of the Hindu religion, with its multitude of deities and forms of worship. Sri Ramakrishna thus performed the Vaishnava, the Tantrika, the Ramait and the Advaita forms of sadhana, culminating finally in the spiritual practices within the Islam and Christian folds. These lent credence to his declaration – Yato mat tato path – as many faiths so many paths (to God).

The doctrine of service is one of the striking features of the message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. It was at a gathering of devotees that the Master had mentioned Shiva jnane jiba seva – service of man is service to God. The youthful Narendranath had then vowed to spread this doctrine which, in his opinion, harmonized abstruse Vedanta with the practical nuances of service and worship, to the worship, to the world at large. To many of the other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, his foremost message was that one should realize god in human life. Social service and the rest should be considered secondary to this great end of human life. It was left to Swami Vivekananda, who was authoritatively supported by Sri Sarada Devi, to interpret the message of the Master and give it a proper orientation in the light of the Indian scriptures, specially the Bhagavadgita and its doctrine of selfless work. The founding of the Ramakrishna Mission by Swami Vivekananda in 1897 marked the establishing of an organization of monks dedicating them to the ideal of *Ātmano mokshārtham jagaddhitāya cha* – for one's liberation and the welfare of the world. The doctrine of service, in course of time, brought about monumental changes in the outlook of the Hindu organizations and was recognized as the national ideal to be pursued by the nation as a whole. What is more, generations of men, fired with this ideal of selfless service, have pledged their life

to the cause of this ideal –they have believed that the path shown by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda will be lead to awakening in their own lives as well as the collective life of the nation. They have believed that a life of renunciation and service, of austerity and chastity, can lead to blessedness, joy and achievement of the highest goal of humanity.

The scriptures speak about the descent of God as man. Although not easily comprehensible to the human mind, this principle of 'incarnation' (avatar) has been discussed in some detail in the Bhagavadgita, which speaks about the descent of the special power in the form a human being when religion and morality in society decline and reach a nadir –"Whenever, O descendant of Bharata, there is decline of Dharma, and rise of Adharma, and then I body myself forth. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of Dharma I come into being in every age."[7] Swami Vivekananda firmly believed that Sri Ramakrishna is such a manifestation of the supreme power of God. As the foremost disciple of the Master, he was thus able to propagate the message and significance of his life for the modern man and place it for the welfare of the country and the world at large.

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Sri Ramakrishna:
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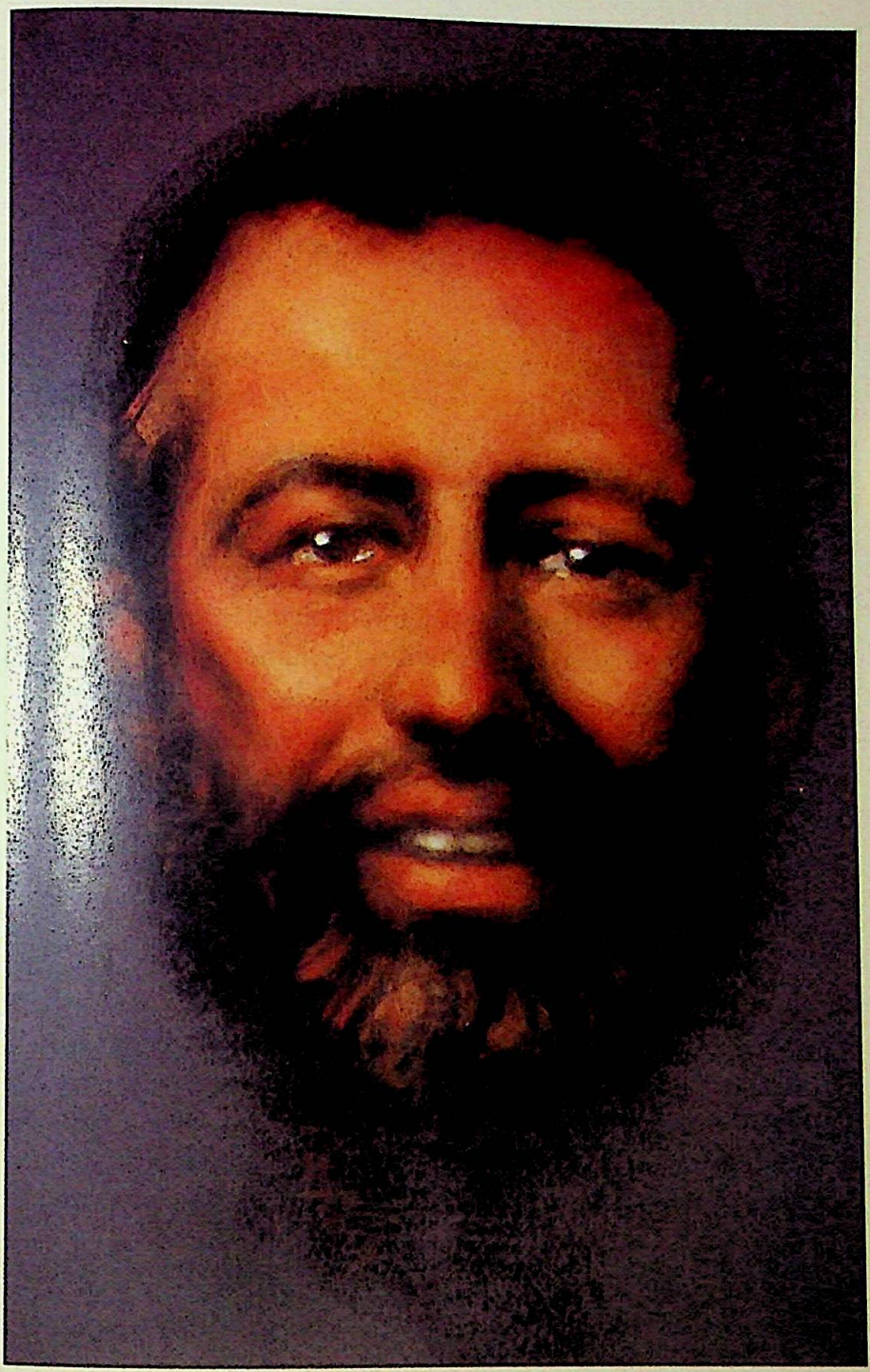

Portrait of Sri Ramakrishna by Swami Tadatmananda

A Study of Sri Ramakrishna's *Bhavamukha* State of Consciousness through Science, Philosophy and Tradition

Swami Atmapriyananda

In his famous essay titled 'Hinduism and Sri Ramakrishna', Swami Vivekananda writes:

> Truth is of two kinds: (1) that which is cognisable by the five ordinary senses of man, and by reasonings based thereon; (2) that which is cognizable by the subtle, supersensuous power of Yoga.
>
> Knowledge acquired by the first means is called science; and knowledge acquired by the second is called the Vedas. ...
>
> The person in whom this supersensuous power is manifested is called a Rishi, and the supersensuous truths which he realises by this power are called the Vedas.
>
> This Rishihood, this power of supersensuous perception of the Vedas, is real religion. And so long as this does not develop in the life of an initiate, so long is religion a mere empty word to him, and it is to be understood that he has not taken yet the first step in religion.[1]

The Indian spiritual tradition is an authentic record of the realizations of rishis constantly engaged in Consciousness research. The truths that they actually 'saw', not through the eyes or the senses but through supersensuous perception, form a dynamic and vibrant body of knowledge created through their exploration and

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insight into the mystery of Consciousness. This river of rich spiritual tradition, set in motion by the rishis ages ago, is flowing unhindered in a thousand streams over the millennia through a perennial chain of teacher-disciple succession, *guru-śisya parampará*, coming down to the present age of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.

'Remain in Bhavamukha'

Bhāvamukha is one of Sri Ramakrishna's unique contributions to the Indian spiritual tradition. Sri Ramakrishna, who lived and moved about soaked in God-consciousness, did not 'conceptualize' bhāvamukha as a philosophical principle, for his mind was too absorbed in the Divine to attempt to transform any spiritual realization into a 'concept'.

The term bhāvamukha arose from three spiritual experiences of Sri Ramakrishna, perhaps unparalleled in the Indian spiritual tradition, and later on was conceptualized as a unique philosophical principle by one of his monastic disciples, Swami Saradananda, the author Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga – a remarkable interpretative treatise on Sri Ramakrishna's exploratory adventures in the amazing expanse of super-consciousness.[2]

Sri Ramakrishna was commanded by the Supreme Being, whom he called the Divine Mother Kali, to 'remain in *bhāvamukha*' – an experience that he had a couple of times during the period of his superhuman spiritual struggles, and a third time almost at the culmination of his twelve years of intense sadhana. Interestingly, this unique spiritual experience was triggered by the mental disturbance that the childlike Sri Ramakrishna, innocence incarnate that he was, felt at the words of his cousin Haladhari. Haladhari, who was arrogant, snobbish, and proud of his scholarship, quoted the scriptures to say that Sri Ramakrishna's visions of gods and goddesses were nothing but a fancy, resulting from a frenzied brain. Sri Ramakrishna was visibly perturbed. Like a child, he ran to his Divine Mother Bhavatarini Kali and piteously importuned her to

tell him about the veracity of his visions. What the divine response was is best described in Sri Ramakrishna's own words:

> I thought that the divine visions that I had had during ecstasy and the commands I had received were all false. The Mother must have cheated me! I was extremely upset. Piqued, I cried to the Mother: 'Mother, I am unlettered and ignorant. Why have You cheated me in this way? I couldn't control myself, and kept crying. I was in a room of the *kuthi* [bungalow]. After a while a smoke-like mist arose from the floor and covered some space before me. Then I saw within it a golden-complexioned, living, calm face with long flowing beard. That figure looked at me intently and said in a deep voice: 'My child, you remain in bhavamukha. You remain in bhavamukha. You remain in bhavamukha!' After repeating this three times, the form slowly dissolved into the mist, then that mist also disappeared. This vision reassured me.[3]

On another occasion he again felt terribly perturbed remembering those words of Haladhari. 'While performing worship in the temple,' he narrated later, 'I cried and pressed the Mother to solve that matter. At that time the Mother, in the guise of a woman known as "Rati's mother", appeared beside the consecrated pitcher [installed in front of the image] and told me: "You remain in bhavamukha!"'.

On a third occasion, when Sri Ramakrishna had remained in the nirvikalpa plane of consciousness, merged in the absolute Brahman, for nearly six months at a stretch – after the peripatetic teacher Tota Puri had imparted him the Vedantic knowledge and left Dakshineswar – he heard the incorporeal voice of the Divine Mother speaking in his heart of hearts: 'You remain in Bhavamukha' (ibid.).

There are essentially three important paradigms through which Bhavamukha may be understood: (A) in the light of modern science, (B) in the light of classical Indian philosophy and mysticism, (C) in the light of Ramakrishna Mission Ideology and practical application

to society at large in order to create a New Social Order based on the ideals of Bhavamukha and Vijnana as experienced and demonstrated in the life of Sri Ramakrishna.

A. Undertanding Bhavamukha in the Light of Modern Science

Bhavamukha could be understood in the light of two epoch-making discoveries in modern physics which revolutionized man's conception of the nature of the physical world – of space, time and matter. One, the theory of relativity and two, quantum mechanics. We would discuss Bhavamukha vis-à-vis these two theories, and briefly point out the unification attempt being made by the superstring theory (also known simply as 'string theory').

A.1. Bhavamukha and the theory of relativity

The fundamental postulate of the theory of relativity is that Nature does not have any preferential frame of reference. That is, all frames of reference are on equal footing as far as physical laws of Nature are concerned. There is no such thing as an absolute frame of reference. Einstein showed that to say that *my* frame is *the right* frame to which the whole of Nature's phenomena should be referred is a scientifically incorrect position. Einstein's genius in resolving the riddle of the interpretation of the historic Michelson-Morley experiment which tried to measure the relative motion through ether by asserting that the real rightness of a frame consists in recognizing that every frame of reference is as much right as every other. Einstein, in thus interpreting the 'null' result of the Michelson-Morley experiment propounded a simple law of Nature: "Nature is such that it is impossible to determine absolute motion by any experiment whatever."[4] A little more than quarter-century before Einstein postulated his theory of relativity, an unsophisticated spiritual scientist, a 'mad' mystic working in his inner laboratory at Dakshineswar unknown to the world discovered a similar principle in the sphere of philosophy and spirituality. Swami Vivekananda, who preached this unique message of his Master to the world at large, expressed it by his parable of

a 'frog in the well': a Hindu sitting in his little well thinks that all the truth is in his own little well. Similarly with the Christian or a Muslim or any other religious practitioner. In the language of relativity, the Hindu, sitting in his own frame of reference, thinks that the vision of the Reality seen from his frame is *the* right one. And the Christian imagines that the view of Reality as seen from *his* frame of reference is *the* right one. Similarly with a Muslim, a Sikh, a Jew and so on. Einstein's principle of relativity asserts that Reality or Nature itself has no way of distinguishing between the different frames because there is no 'preferential' frame. 'Rightness' as applied to a frame of reference cannot be found because it does not exist, it is a myth. Eddington, in his famous book *The Nature of the Physical World*, puts it beautifully as follows:

> You are standing with a label in your hand before a row of packages all precisely similar. You are worried because there is nothing to help you to decide which of the packages it should be attached to. Look at the label and see that what is written on it. Nothing!
>
> 'Right' as applied to frames of space is a blank label. It implies that there is something distinguishing a right frame from a wrong frame, but when you ask what is this distinguishing property, the only answer we receive is 'Rightness', which does not make the meaning clearer or convince us that there is a meaning.[5]

Lorentz-Fitzgerald contraction is one striking phenomenon which illustrates the above point dramatically. Naively put, it says that a moving rod contracts in the direction of its motion. This contraction, however, is extremely small in ordinary circumstances when the speed of motion is small. It appears preposterous that a moving rod behaves as badly as to keep altering its dimensions merely when it is pointed in different directions! If a 6-footer appears to be of 3 feet in a particular frame of reference, it does not

indicate any peculiarity about the man, the object, at all. It simply means that the frame in which he is measured is such that in that frame he appears to be 3 feet. In some other frame, he could be 4 feet and in some other 5 feet and so on. As Eddington puts it, "we have been confronted with something not contemplated in classical physics – a multiplicity of frames of space, *each one as good as the other.*" (Italics added by us). This means that we ought to give up our notion that these frames are absolute. "The relativity of the current scheme of physics invites us to search deeper and find the absolute scheme underlying it, so that we may see the world in a truer perspective."[6]

All frames of reference in Physics, all points of view in the world of spirituality and philosophy, being on equal footing means, therefore that none of them represents the absolute truth. All of them are but partial views of the Reality, *relative* views of the Absolute, *with respect to* and, therefore, *as conditioned by* the particular frame of reference. Sri Ramakrishna enunciated this principle by his beautiful illustration of several blind men feeling the elephant. Each person perceived the elephant differently, but each of these perceptions were right, albeit partially, and none of them represented the absolute truth. Or, take Sri Ramakrishna's illustration of a person seeing a red animal on a tree, which some other person claimed to be green while still another person saw it as yellow. To settle the quarrel that ensued, they went to the man sitting under the tree who said that all their perceptions were true, but partially true. None of them represented the absolute truth. The animal was a chameleon which was green, yellow, red and sometimes colourless too. Or, take the instance of Sri Ramakrishna's sincere remonstration before the Divine Mother: 'Mother, everybody says that my watch alone is right and those of others are wrong; but Mother, none of them is right." Doesn't this reflect, graphically, Eddington's statement quoted earlier: "Rightness is a blank label"? Or, take Sri Ramakrishna's parable of a dyer: a dyer was seen dying

clothes with a solution, dye-stuff in his tub. Interestingly, the same dye-stuff dyed different clothes with different colours according to their choice. One of the intelligent onlookers, when his turn came to choose the colour he wanted, said: Sir, colour my cloth with the colour of the dye-stuff in the tub!

These illustrations bring home the point that all the different colours – all the relative points of view – arise out of that Absolute and the Infinite which does not get affected thereby. And there is no contradiction between the different emanations, from the point of view of the Absolute, although there may be differences between them at their own re*lative* level. Staying at the level of Bhavamukha, Sri Ramakrishna is everything to everybody, dyeing the cloth of each person according to the colour of his choice, dipping it in the same dye-stuff which is the source of all the colours, Itself being colourless! And the intelligent person is he who leaves it to the dyer himself to dye his cloth with the master colour of the dye-stuff which is equivalent to realizing That Supreme Reality, the Absolute, by dipping into It and being soaked in it – *otaprota* in the words of the Upanishad, that is, by being and becoming It. Hence Swami Vivekananda's definition of religion: real religion is being and becoming. The Absolute and the Infinite is That Truth (*Tatsat*) wherein all contradictions as it were meet and lose their 'contradictoriness'. The Upanisahdic Rishis, therefore, spoke in a language of apparent contradiction to truly describe the Supreme Truth as in the case of the *Katha Upanishad* mantra: *asino dooram vrajati sayano yati sarvatah*[7] which means: It is sitting still but travels far, It is lying still but moves about everywhere. Sri Ramakrishna was fond of a song by the famous poet Kamalakanta who sang, 'O Mother, you are sometimes white, sometimes yellow, sometimes blue, sometimes red, and sometimes colourless. You are Purusha, You are Prakriti, and again You are formless, void!" Each of these relative perceptions is true from the frame of reference of the individual Sadhaka, but what the Absolute Truth Itself is cannot

be known as long as one is stationed in any particular frame. From this, flows as a corollary, Sri Ramakarishna's message of harmony and synthesis. The Master Frame of reference of such a Supreme Prophet of harmony and synthesis, the Frame of the man who lives under the tree, the Frame of the man who was dyeing everybody's clothes with the colour of his choice with the master colour of the dye-stuff, the Master Frame that amalgamates, harmonizes, synthesizes all the possible frames of infinite variety, is the Frame of whom we call an Avatara or a Special Manifestation of the Divine. He can move and roam and swim at will like a big fish in the infinite ocean of the Absolute, from one frame to another, shift positions and paradigms in a flash, as Swami Vivekananda or Sri Ramakrishna often did. Such a Master Frame of a Jesus, a Buddha, a Krishna or a Ramakrishna, is what is referred to as Bhavamukha. Such a giant wave in the infinite ocean of spirituality can alone lay claim to be a World Teacher, Saviour of Mankind, God of All, because he is all things to all men, the dye-stuff in the tub, the man living under the tree, with form, without form, beyond form and formlessness and how many infinite varieties besides! Romain Rolland wrote, "In the two words equilibrium and synthesis the whole of Vivekananda's constructive genius could be summed up."[8] And such an equilibrium is not a static equilibrium where contradictory forces are at rest annulling each other, but it is a *dynamic equilibrium* in which there is incessant activity but the resultant effect is intense calm and peace and stillness with no ripple of conflict. Sri Ramakrishna, remaining in Bhavamukha, taught the world by his life and teaching, this message of harmony and peace, by giving the mind of man a powerful impulse not to put any limitation on the Infinite and the Absolute saying It can be this, only this, and not anything else.

A.2. Bhavamukha and quantum mechanics

It is common knowledge how the development of the subject

of quantum mechanics coming with the discovery of the quantum nature of light by Max Plank and the wave nature of particles by de Broglie revolutionized our worldview of the microcosmic world of particles and fields. What with the startling discoveries by a host of players in this fascinating field like Schrodinger, Heisenberg, Max Born, and a large number of physicists, not only was developed a new worldview of matter and the physical world, but a new epistemology. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, in particular, engendered a startlingly new epistemology. We had so far taken for granted that the theory of knowledge that is primarily intended to apply to macroscopic object or the world of the macrocosm is equally applicable to the microscopic pieces of matter or the world of the microcosm. But the development of quantum mechanics revealed to us that this is no longer so. As Eddington put it, "The principle of indeterminacy, like the principle of relativity, represents the abandonment of a mistaken assumption which we never had sufficient reason for making."[9] Quantum mechanics, as Schrodinger, one of the founding fathers of wave/quantum mechanics said in his famous Nobel lecture, replaced the old paradigm of 'either-or' by the new paradigm of 'both-and'. This new paradigm is analogous to the state of Bhavamukha in which the Supreme Reality is realized as both Personal and Impersonal, both Transcendent and Immanent, both with form and Formless. Sri Ramakrishna, abiding in Bhavamukha, beckons humankind to this 'brave new world' of harmony and peace, equilibrium and synthesis, wherein non-contradiction, universal acceptance, is the new law and this new world view, new *weltanchuuang*, will shape the minds and hearts of human being all the world over in the present age.

A.3. Bhavamukha and Unified Field Theory

The quest for a unified field theory began with Einstein who could not reconcile himself to accepting that Nature is founded on an extravagant design as to have two distinct forces known during

his time – gravity and electromagnetism. He was seeking a *unified field theory* that he hoped would show that both these two forces were indeed manifestations of one grand unified force. While the contemporary physicists were busy with the newly emerging quantum mechanics and were consumed with its charm, beauty and power, Einstein became a sort of recluse doggedly pursuing his pet theory of a grand unified force field. Although not blessed with success, the 'lonely old chap' as he called himself at that time, did not give up the attempt saying that one day physics will unravel the mystery of a grand unified field theory. Tracing this thrilling history of the bold scientific adventure of one of the finest minds of all time in the world of physical science, Brian Greene, the author of *Elegant Universe*, which the *New York Times* has called a 'compulsively readable' book, writes as follows:

> Einstein was simply ahead of his time. More than half a century later, his dream of a unified theory has become the Holy Grail of modern physics. And a sizeable part of physics and mathematics community is becoming increasingly convinced that string theory may provide the answer. From one principle – that everything at its most microscopic level consists of combinations of vibrating strands – string theory provides a single explanatory framework capable of encompassing all forces and all matter. ...For the first time in the history of physics we therefore have a framework with the capacity to explain every fundamental feature upon which the universe is constructed. For this reason string theory is sometimes described as possibly being the 'theory of everything' (ToE) or the 'ultimate' or 'final' theory.[10]

In the world of spirituality, and extended therefrom to society with all its hopes and aspirations, ambitions and achievements, Bhavamukha may be the Holy Grail, the ToE that would provide a unified framework, a complete *weltanchuuang* to encompass,

to unify and embrace different points of view, worldviews and frameworks, being at the same time an ever expanding structure, open ended and infinitely vulnerable. The application of Bhavamukha to society to create a New World Order will be discussed towards the end of this paper.

B. Undertanding Bhavamukha in the Light of Classical Indian Philosophy and Mysticism

B.1. Bhavamukha and Vijnana

There is another concept from the Indian spiritual tradition to which Sri Ramakrishna provides fresh insightful meanings: vijñāna. Vedanta commonly speaks about an ajñānī, ignorant person, and a jñānī, one who has attained the knowledge of the supreme Reality. Besides these two, Sri Ramakrishna highlights the state of the vijñānī. An ajñānī is one who takes this unreal world of relativity to be real. A jñānī is one who has realized the ephemeral nature of the world, and equating ephemerality with unreality sees the world of relativity to be unreal like a dream.

Traditional Vedanta calls this person a *brahma-vid*, knower of Brahman. Some Vedantins speak of gradations amongst knowers of Brahman: *brahma-vid-vara, brahma-vid-varīyān,* and *brahma-vid-varistha.* In the case of the *brahma-vid-varistha*, the highest type of *jñānī,* there is no question of seeing the world of relativity at all, just as a person in deep sleep sees nothing. He remains absorbed in the supreme Brahman, and perceiving nothing else becomes merged in it: *'Brahmaveda brahmaiva bhavati;* a knower of Brahman becomes Brahman.'

Sri Ramakrishna adds a new category into the classes of brahma-jñānīs: the vijñānī. A *vijñānī,* according to Sri Ramakrishna, is one who having attained *pūrna jñāna* full knowledge of Brahman, emerges from this state of complete absorption in the Supreme – by

divine will – for the good of the world, which for a *vijñānī* stands transformed as the *līlā,* divine play, of supreme Consciousness. For a *vijñānī,* the world is God's *līlā,* the play of the supreme Consciousness in the relative existence. Under a divine command, and out of great compassion and unbounded love for all beings, the *vijñānī* engages in the welfare of all beings: *sarva-bhuta-hite-ratah.* While a *jñānī* rejects the world – considering it to be unreal, like a mirage or a dream – a *vijñānī* sees the world transformed into a luminous and joyous reality saturated with divine bliss. From a philosophical point of view, it may be said that a *jñānī* remains tuned to the *sat* and *cit* aspects of *sat-cit-ānanda,* Existence-Knowledge-Bliss, while a *vijñānī,* by remaining tuned to the *ānanda* aspect of Brahman, lives immersed in supreme joy and rejoices, *ramate*; is fulfilled, *tripto bhavati*; and sports, *krīdati,* in Brahman.

The Bhagavadgita and the Upanishads may be said to describe the state of a vijñānī, rather than that of a jñānī, through such terms as ātma-rata, ātma-trpta, ātma-santusta, and ātma-krīda, and others. Such a vijñānī, who has gone beyond the sat and cit aspects of Brahman and has realized the ānanda aspect, sees the world not as unreal, mithyā – as is the case with a jñānī – but as the divine play of the supreme Consciousness, with the full manifestation of the ānanda aspect of Brahman subsuming and overwhelming the sat and cit aspects. The vijñānī perceives the nitya – absolute, transcendent – aspect of the supreme Reality as vijñāna-ghana-ekarasa, an unbroken mass of awareness, and also perceives the līlā aspect of the same Reality as the infilling and overflowing bliss that interpenetrates and saturates, otaprota, all that exists. This dual perception of the nitya and līlā aspects of the supreme Reality, realized as one's own inner Self, Atman, in the stillness of nirvikalpa samādhi and as an all-pervading awareness and joy in the divine sport of life, is the state of bhāvamukha. The state of vijñāna as explicated by Sri Ramakrishna is manifest in the avataras, divine incarnations. The avataras, remaining in the state of bhāvamukha express through their lives, teachings,

and the tradition they initiate and head the ānanda aspect of Reality, the infinite bliss of God. Jesus Christ's exhortation to 'rejoice and be exceedingly glad' points to this ānanda aspect of God.

Philosophically speaking, the vijñānī's perception represents a paradigm shift. The vijñānī sees the supreme Reality, Brahman, as nitya – transcendent, absolute, impersonal, and infinite; and simultaneously, realizes the same supreme Reality as līlā – the immanent and all-pervading Consciousness, the indwelling Reality of all beings, antaryāmin, that interpenetrates and saturates (otaprota) the universe through and through. The world of relativity is no longer rejected as mithyā, but is seen as līlā, as ānanda-svarūpa, of the nature of bliss. Thus, the new paradigm of the vijñānī is nitya-līlā, which replaces the traditional jñānī's paradigm of satya-mithyā. The famous dictum 'brahma satyam jagat mithyā: Brahman is real, the world unreal' is transformed into "Brahma nityam jagat līlā; Brahman is eternal, the world (its) sport'. In this last assertion the oneness and transcendence of Brahman, as declared in the Advaita philosophy, is not compromised. The manifoldness and immanence of Brahman, emphasized in the Dvaita schools, is also not rejected. Both are perceived as being subsumed into a totality where Reality is perceived as the 'one' as well as the 'many' – not the 'many' seen in the unawakened state of an ajñānī, but the 'many' seen through the eyes of a vijñānī, a transformed world of manifoldness through which the 'one' is playing, as it were, its explicable divine sport as the 'many'.

A jñānī merging into and becoming absorbed and lost in the infinitude of the Advaita experience of Brahman, now emerges as a ***vijñānī*** in the finite world of relativity, which stands transformed before his vision as the manifestation of the same Brahman. This transformed vision of relativity and duality, as it were, 'goes beyond' the non-dual Advaita experience without any contradiction between the two. This perhaps is the meaning of Sri Ramakrishna's statement: 'The spiritual experiences of this place (meaning himself) have

surpassed even the Vedas and Vedanta.'[11] If one seeks a logical explanation of how a *vijñānī* emerges from the state of complete absorption in the absolute and the infinite Brahman, one has to conclude that such a logical formulation is impossible.

This is the mystery of the divine incarnation, avatāra-tattva, which defies all logic, as far as our limited minds go. Though this state defies logic, it does not contradict it; in this sense it is not a mystery, it is something mystical.

Swami Tapasyananda once told the present author that Sri Ramakrishna's concept of the *vijñānī* abiding in *bhāvamukha*, may be called 'alogical mysticism', for it is non-logical without being illogical; and it can only be understood, if at all, through a divinely blessed super-sensory perception.

B.2. The Ultimate Reality as Impersonal-Personal

Sri Ramakrishna realized the ultimate Reality as both impersonal and personal, both formless and with form, both transcendent and immanent. He has used wonderful illustrations in his own inimitable style to describe this realization.

One of his teachings – which are nothing but divine music – about the ultimate Reality is as follows: Do not put any limitation on the infinitude of the supreme Reality. It is wrong to affirm that God can be formless and not with form, that God can be transcendent and not immanent, impersonal and not personal. Different spiritual aspirants realize the infinite and absolute Reality in innumerable ways, and none has the right to say that this or that alone is 'the' right perception of Reality. Sri Ramakrishna says: 'Yes, God has form and He is formless too. Further, He is beyond both form and formlessness. No one can limit Him.'[12] He illustrates the impossibility of the limited human mind comprehending the infinitude of the supreme Reality with the imagery of an ant going to a sugar hill, picking up a grain of sugar to carry home, and imagining

that it can carry the whole hill back the next time round! Such is the predicament of the human intellect.

Philosophically speaking, Vedanta posits two forms of Brahman: sopādhika brahma, Brahman associated with upādhis, limiting adjuncts; and nirupādhika brahma, Brahman devoid of any upādhi. They are also called saguna brahma, Brahman with attributes, and nirguna brahma, Brahman without attributes. Since these two forms of Brahman are but aspects of the same Reality, they are not different.

Acharya Shankara speaks of these two forms of Brahman and their non-difference as follows:

> *Dvirūpam hi brahmāvagamyate nāma-rūpa-vikāra-bhedopādhiviśistam tad-viparītam ca sarvopādhi-vivarjitam. ... Evam-ekam-api brahmāpeksitopādhi-sambandham nirastopādhi-sambandham copāsyatvena jñeyatvena ca vedāntesu upadisyate.*
>
> Brahman, verily, is known to be of two forms: that which is qualified by the adjunct or difference caused by the modifications of name and form, and that which, on the contrary, is devoid of all adjuncts. ... Although Brahman is one, it is taught in the Vedantic texts as that which is to be meditated upon [or worshipped] as being related to assumed adjuncts, and as that to be realized [or known] as being devoid of any relation to adjuncts.[13]

Acharya Shankara calls the saguna aspect of Brahman as upāsyabrahma, capable of being worshipped or meditated upon. On the other hand, the *nirguna* aspect of Brahman is *jñeya-brahma*, to be realized or known as one's own Self, and not worshipped as different from oneself. The acharya dismisses the differences as merely in name:

> *Eko hy-ayam-ātmā nāma-mātra-bhedena bahudhābhidhāyata iti.*
>
> The one Self, indeed, is designated differently on account of the difference in mere name (1.4.22).

Sri Ramakrishna gives a striking example to illustrate the non-difference of God without form and God with form: 'Look, God is with form and again formless. Who knows what else He is besides these? Do you know what God with form is like? It is like water and ice. When water freezes, it becomes ice – which inside and outside is water only. Ice is nothing but water. But look, water does not have any particular form, whereas ice does. Similarly, through the cooling influence of the devotee's love the ocean of the indivisible Satchidananda freezes and takes various forms, as does ice.'[14]

And again:

> No one can say with finality that God is only 'this' and nothing else. He is formless, and again He has forms. For the bhakta He assumes forms. But He is formless for the jnāni, that is, for him who looks on the world as a mere dream. ...
>
> Think of Brahman, Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, as a shoreless ocean. Through the cooling influence, as it were, of the bhakta's love, the water has frozen at places into blocks of ice. In other words, God now and then assumes various forms for His lovers and reveals Himself to them as a Person. But with the rising of the sun of Knowledge, the blocks of ice melt. Then one doesn't feel any more that God is a Person, nor does one see God's forms. What He is cannot be described. Who will describe Him? He who would do so disappears. He cannot find his 'I' any more.[15]

Sri Ramakrishna was also fond of comparing a sadhaka, spiritual aspirant, who ventures to describe God to a salt doll that went to measure the depth of the ocean. It dissolved in and became one with the ocean. Who then would remain as the individual to come back and give a description of the ocean?

B.3. Nitya and Lila: Aspects of the Same Reality

Conditioned as we are by names and forms – our bodies to be counted first among these – our spiritual ascent to the attributeless Brahman, nirupādhika nirguna brahma, should perforce be through Brahman with attributes and with qualities, sopadhika saguna brahma.

The realization of the transcendental Reality, nirguna brahma, is through the realization of the saguna brahma that interpenetrates the world of names and forms we live in. Swami Vivekananda observes: 'The Hindus have discovered that the absolute can only be realised, or thought of, or stated, through the relative.'[16] Swami Yatiswarananda has called it one of the 'laws of spiritual life': 'The realization of the Absolute – the transcendental Reality – lies always through the realization of the immanent divine Principle. The holy Personality (Ista Devatā) is a manifestation of this divine Principle.'[17]

Sri Ramakrishna said that the same Satchidananda Brahman of the Vedanta tradition is Satchidananda Krishna of the Vaishnava tradition as well as Satchidananda Kali of the tantra tradition. *Saguna brahma*, called Ishvara or Divine Mother Kali, is the same Brahman conceived of as with attributes and qualities. As a corollary we could argue that if, from the point of view of Brahman, Ishvara or Kali could be called the *saguna* aspect of Brahman, then, by the same logic, from the perspective of Ishvara or Kali, Brahman should be the *nirguna* aspect of Kali. Thus, from his realizations, Sri Ramakrishna arrived at the following simple equations: Kali = *saguna* Brahman; Brahman = *nirguna* Kali.

As pointed out above, the realization of Brahman, the transcendent principle, is first through the realization of the immanent principle. Sri Ramakrishna says, 'Pray to Brahman with attributes, who listens to your prayers, and He Himself will give you full Knowledge of Brahman; for that which is Brahman

with attributes is verily Brahman without attributes, that which is Brahman is verily Shakti. One realizes this non-duality after the attainment of Perfect Knowledge. The Divine Mother gives Her devotee Brahmajnana too.'[18] The uncompromising Advaitic text Avadhuta Gita begins with the following statement: '*Īśvarānugrahād-eva pumsām-advaita-vāsanā*'; aspiration for the Advaitic realization dawns in the aspirant's heart only by divine grace, by the compassion and blessings of Ishvara.

As mentioned before, Einstein's theory of relativity speaks of frames of reference, a concept that could be used with telling effect in the present context. If Brahman is chosen as the frame of reference from which to look at Reality, Shakti is the saguna aspect of Brahman. Brahman is the transcendent and absolute Reality, while Shakti is the immanent aspect interpenetrating the relative world of existence. On the other hand, if Shakti is chosen as the frame of reference, then Brahman becomes the nirguna or transcendent aspect of Shakti. From the Brahman frame, the world of relativity – of names and forms, including the jivas, beings, and ultimately Ishvara – appear unreal, because from that frame there is only one absolute transcendent Reality in which the triad of jīva-jagat-īśvara is sublated. From the Brahman frame, therefore, Brahman appears as the one Reality, brahma satyam, and the world of relativity appears unreal, jagat mithyā, for it has no independent existence apart from Brahman.

However, a new vision appears when, after attaining the Absolute, one looks at Reality from the Shakti or Ishvara frame – it is the immanent Reality seen as sporting and playing as innumerable names and forms, which in fact derive their reality and existence from the Absolute. They appear as the *līlā*, divine sport, of the transcendent Absolute, the *nitya*. Why and how the *nitya* 'chooses' to play its divine sport as the *līlā* is a question that cannot be logically formulated with regard to the Absolute, as Swami Vivekananda once pointed

out in answer to a similar question by a group of pundits in Madras: 'Questions of how, why, or wherefore relate to the manifested world, and not to the Unmanifested, which is above all change and causation, and therefore above all relation to the changing universe. ... The question, therefore, is not one which can be reasonably put. Put a proper question ... and I will answer.'[19] This is the paradigm shift from *satya-mithyā* to *nitya-līlā* spoken of in the earlier section.

Now, the Brahman frame is no frame at all, there being no question of observation or perception of Reality, the observer or the perceiver himself having become one with Brahman, and the triputi, triad, of jñātā-jñeya-jñāna, knower-known-knowledge, having vanished – the salt doll having got dissolved in the ocean. All observation, transaction, and perception is possible only in the Shakti frame; and the only paradigm that accommodates the reality of the relative world as *līlā*, rooted in and derived from the reality of Brahman, is the paradigm of *nitya-līlā* emphasized by Sri Ramakrishna. Advaita is not compromised, and the Dvaita reality is accepted as the *līlā* aspect of the same Reality, *nitya*. *Lila* being the *ānanda* aspect of Brahman, life in the relative world is one of great joy – the joyous play of the *nitya* as *līlā*. This is the *parā-bhakti*, supreme love, spoken of in the very last chapter of the Gita,[20] and attained 'after' the fullness of *brahma-jñāna*, as distinguished from the bhakti mentioned in the Gita as leading to *brahma-jñāna* (14.26). In *vijñāna*, jnana and bhakti are blended. This beautiful blend then issues out in action, karma – the whole of life being transformed into one divine *līlā*, with the full realization of the *nitya* intact. The following well-known hymn composed by Swami Vivekananda on Sri Ramakrishna beautifully epitomizes this synthesis:

Advaya-tattva-samāhita-cittam
projjvala-bhakti-patāvrta-vrttam;
Karma-kalevaram-adbhuta-cestam
yāmi gurum śaranam bhava-vaidyam.[21]

> I take refuge in that guru, the physician for curing the disease of samsara, relative existence, whose mind is absorbed in the absolute non-dual Consciousness, who is covered with the effulgent envelope of bhakti, who is wonderfully active [in redeeming beings] through his [divine] body engaged in karma.

Swami Vivekananda's grand unification scheme of the different yogas is rooted in and based on the nitya-līlā realization of Sri Ramakrishna. In a remarkable letter to Alasinga, he wrote: 'The dry, abstract Advaita must become living – poetic – in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology – and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. That is my life's work' (Swami Vivekananda's *Complete Works*, Vol. 5, pp.104-5). To E. T. Sturdy, he wrote: 'I want to give them dry, hard reason, softened in the sweetest syrup of love and made spicy with intense work, and cooked in the kitchen of Yoga, so that even a baby can easily digest it' (Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 104).

The vijñānī epitomizes the beautiful blend of the para-jñāna, supreme knowledge, of the seer of the Absolute, the nitya, and the parā-bhakti of the sage enjoying the bliss of the immanent personal God of love.

There is a wonderful hymn by Pramadadas Mitra which describes this fusion of jnana and bhakti in Sri Ramakrishna:

> *Vijñāna-pīyūsa-nimagna-mūrtih*
> *pasparśa yān yān dayayā karena;*
>
> *Te kāminī-kāñcana-rikta-cittāh*
> *sadyo babhūvur-bhuvi rāmakrsnah.*

Premābdhi-gambhīra-taranga-bhangairāndolito
yo bhagavad-vilīnah;

Bhaktir-viśuddhā svayam-āvir-āsīt
pum-vigraho'ho bhuvi rāmakrsnah.

Tam-adbhutam kañcid-acintya-śaktim
vande praśāntam paripūrna-bodham;

Jñānasya bhakteśca viśuddha-mūrtim
dvi-mūrtim-ekam bhuvi rāmakrsnah.

Whosoever Ramakrishna, embodied on earth, immersed in the nectar of *vijnana*, compassionately touches with his hands, become instantly free from all mental attachment to lust and lucre. That male frame merged in God-consciousness and tossed about by the waves breaking forth in the profound ocean of *prema*, divine love, is nothing but unalloyed bhakti manifesting itself as Ramakrishna. I bow down to Ramakrishna, a wondrous and incomprehensible power, tranquil and brimming with divine awareness, an immaculate dual image of jnana and bhakti (manifest) on earth.

C. Understanding Bhavamukha in the light of Ramakrishna Mission Ideology and its practical application to society at large in order to create a New Social Order

C.1. Bhavamukha and Ramakrishna Mission Ideology

The avataras remain in the state of bhāvamukha expressing through their lives and teachings, and through the tradition they initiate and head, the *ānanda* aspect of the Reality, the infinite bliss of God. The avatara, remaining in *bhāvamukha*, transacts with the relative world out of motiveless compassion, *ahaitukī karunā*, with his being fully immersed all the while in the absolute Brahman.

Remaining in *bhāvamukha*, the avatara becomes as it were the *pañca-mukhī*, five-faced, Shiva, the upward-looking face, *ūrdhva-vaktra*, drawing light and power from the transcendent Absolute, the pure Being beyond the world of relativity, and transmitting this power out of compassion on all sides – represented by the four faces facing the four directions – to the world of relativity, the world of becoming. The avatara, stationed in *bhāvamukha*, thus balances the two: being and becoming, absolute and relative, transcendent and immanent. This balancing is similar to what is known in physics as 'saddle point equilibrium'. The One, the Absolute, and the many, the relative, are no longer opposed or antagonistic; instead, they are seen as the *nitya* and the *līlā* aspects of the same Reality; the divine interplay between the two marks the compassionate mission of the avatara for the good of the world, *loka kalyāna*. Therefore, the spiritual tradition that the Ramakrishna avatara has set in motion – the Ramakrishna Mission, or more broadly, the Ramakrishna Movement – has this nitya-līlā blend as its ideal. This is reflected in the motto Swami Vivekananda chose for the Order: 'Ātmano-moksārtham jagaddhitāya ca; for one's own liberation and the welfare of the world.' Making this nitya-līlā realization of the avatara, Sri Ramakrishna in bhāvamukha, as a vibrant and living practical force in the modern world was the great mission accomplished by Swami Vivekananda. His own declaration of this unique and new contribution to the Indian spiritual tradition may be recalled in this context: 'What Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and I have added to this [the Hindu and Buddhist traditions] is, that the Many and the One are the same Reality, perceived by the same mind at different times and in different attitudes' (Swami Vivekananda's Complete Works, Vol. 8, p. 261).

This complete and holistic vision combines the global and the local in a unique way. This inimitable vision is more a theme for reverential meditation and inward feeling than of intellectual understanding or analytical reasoning. This synthesis of local and global perspectives – locally serious and globally mirthful – is the

state of bhāvamukha in which Sri Ramakrishna and other avataras dwelt. While one is 'in' the play, one is to play with all seriousness. This is the local locus. But the global vision of the 'entire' play as great fun is the cosmic focus. Being focussed in the cosmos, this global vision gives the power to look on the entire play with perfect detachment, absolute equanimity, and childlike joy. The realization of this intermingling, the coexistence of order and chaos – in fact, the emergence of order from chaos – endows us with a unique weltanschauung, world view, that releases us from the bondage of thought, the network of conceptualization. Readers who are aware of researches in chaos and the close interlinking of order and chaos would know the beauty of both.[22] Once this new vision opens up, life becomes full of meaning, because it is only then that one realizes the utter futility of the search for a meaning in it! Meaningful life would then melt away into a life of joyful meaninglessness! Rather, it would become a life of real fullness, pūrnatva, for it is lived in the lap of the perfect balance of meaningfulness and meaninglessness. No thoughts, no past or future, no wants, no desires – perfect stillness.

Sister Nivedita's interpretation of the above statement of Swami Vivekananda – as the fusion of jnana and bhakti, and their beautiful blend issuing out in karma for the welfare of the world – may also be recalled in this context:

> It must never be forgotten that it was the Swami Vivekananda who, while proclaiming the sovereignty of the Advaita Philosophy, as including that experience in which all is one, without a second, also added to Hinduism the doctrine that Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Advaita are but three phases or stages in a single development, of which the last-named constitutes the goal. This is part and parcel of the still greater and more simple doctrine that the many and the One are the same Reality, perceived by the mind at different times and in different attitudes; or as Sri Ramakrishna expressed the same thing, 'God is both with form and without form.

> And He is that which includes both form and formlessness.'
>
> It is this which adds its crowning significance to our Master's life, for here he becomes the meeting-point, not only of East and West, but also of past and future. If the many and the One be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all modes of worship alone, but equally all modes of work, all modes of struggle, all modes of creation, which are paths of realisation. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life itself is religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid.
>
> This is the realisation which makes Vivekananda the great preacher of Karma, not as divorced from, but as expressing Jnana and Bhakti. To him, the workshop, the study, the farmyard, and the field are as true and fit scenes for the meeting of God with man as the cell of the monk or the door of the temple. To him, there is no difference between service of man and worship of God, between manliness and faith, between true righteousness and spirituality. All his words, from one point of view, read as a commentary upon this central conviction. 'Art, science, and religion', he said once, 'are but three different ways of expressing a single truth. But in order to understand this we must have the theory of Advaita.' (Swami Vivekananda's *Complete Works*, Vol. 1, pp. xv-xvi)

C.2. Psychological Simulation of Bhavamukha

The spiritual tradition of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda envisions that each one of the followers of this tradition would try to live the ideal of *bhāvamukha* and approximate to it as much as his or her spiritual advancement would allow. This psychological "simulation" of the spiritual content of Sri Ramakrishna's *bhāvamukha* is

the sadhana that each one of the followers of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition is called upon to perform. The word simulation, which is normally understood as meaning pretence or feigning, sham or counterfeit, has gained much currency, however, in the world of computer science and computer modelling, as in 'computer simulation' to mean a very different thing. The Google Dictionary gives the following as one of the meanings of the word 'simulation': produce a computer model of, as in the example: future population changes were simulated by computer. The Meriam-Webster Dictionary gives the following meanings, apart from the usual meaning mentioned earlier, for 'simulation': (a) the imitative representation of the functioning of one system or process by means of the functioning of another, as for example: a computer simulation of an industrial process, (b) examination of a problem often not subject to direct experimentation by means of a simulating device. In the world of spiritual sadhana, this could be used as meaning the meditation taught in the *Yoga Sutra: vīta-rāga-viśayam vā cittam*,[23] literally translated as 'or (by meditation on) the heart that has given up all attachment to sense-objects'. Commenting on this aphorism, Swami Vivekananda says: 'Take some holy person, some great person whom you revere, some saint whom you know to be perfectly non-attached, and think of his heart. That heart has become non-attached, and meditate on that heart; it will calm the mind.'[24] This is the meaning of Swami Vivekananda's exhortation to Sri Ramakrishna's followers to cast themselves in the 'mould of Sri Ramakrishna'. One remarkable example of this process of 'simulation' in spiritual sadhana is prescribed by Acharya Shankara in his *Gita Bhashya* as follows: *sarvatra eva hi adhyatma shastre kritarthalakshanani yani tani eva sadhanani updishyante yatnasadhyatvat. Yani yatnasadhyani sadhanani lakshanani cha bhavanti tani,* which means: everywhere in the spiritual scriptures, the very characteristics of a person who has attained fulfilment [through spiritual realization] are taught to be the means of sadhana as these are attainable through practice

and effort. [Thus], those that are attainable through practice and effort, verily become means of sadhana [for a spiritual aspirant or sadhaka] as well as the [natural] characteristics [of a person who has attained to realization]. This is the meaning of Sri Ramakrishna's own exhortation that Swami Vivekananda called 'practical Advaitism': 'First tie the knowledge of nonduality in a corner of your cloth, then do as you please.'[25]

Swami Ramakrishnananda, a monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna who undoubtedly knew Sri Ramakrishna's mission only too well, once made a stunning statement: 'Ramakrishna Mission is that which has produced a Ramakrishna.'[26] The meaning is that the Ramakrishna Mission can produce all-round characters harmonizing jnana, bhakti, karma, and yoga; characters cast in the mould of Sri Ramakrishna, with minds and hearts so refined, so elevated and tuned to the wavelength of Sri Ramakrishna's own mind and heart that they can live and operate at the level of Sri Ramakrishna, simulating the bhāvamukha ideal in their own lives.

On this sacred occasion, when Sri Ramakrishna's followers are celebrating the the hundred and seventy-fifth birth anniversary of the Master, the one sadhana that we ought to reverentially take up in all humility is the attempt at a psychological simulation of Sri Ramakrishna's *bhāvamukha* ideal through meditation on the mind and heart of Sri Ramakrishna, merging our own minds in our hearts, *mano hrdi niruddhya*,[27] and pouring out this mind-heart fusion to Sri Ramakrishna as an offering to realize his true being as abiding in *bhāvamukha*. This realization should come through the fusion of 'the heart, the higher intuition, and the mind' – *hrdā manīsā manasā'bhiklrptah*.[28] This is a sadhana that, in the present age, brings individual fulfilment and collective good.

This sadhana conduces to the realization of the ideal of the Ramakrishna Mission spoken about by Swami Ramakrishnananda; an ideal that is also described, succinctly but eloquently, in the

Order's motto, by Swami Vivekananda, who poetically and artistically recreated the same ideal in the Order's emblem. These are two great gifts of Swami Vivekananda to the modern world – the motto and the emblem of the Ramakrishna Mission. The motto is a great mantra for repetition and realization; the emblem is a great symbol for meditation and illumination. This non-traditional and unconventional *japa-dhyāna*, supplemented and reinforced, invigorated and energized by the traditional and conventional *mantra-japa* and *rūpa-dhyāna*, is a holistic sadhana *for* the modern age. Blessed is the person who realizes the true significance of this modern sadhana and whose entire being joyfully gets attuned to its practice through a new awakening in consciousness.

Om Tat Sat. Sri Ramakrishnaarpanamastu.

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Sri Ramakrishna as *Acine Gāch*: "The Tree Without a Name"

Swami Tyagananda

The Bengali phrase *acine gāch* refers to a tree which cannot be recognized or identified, a tree which is a puzzle. The more we try to figure out what tree it is, the more confused we get and the more perplexed we become. Hence it is "the tree without a name," a mysterious tree which is seen and yet not really seen. Its existence is known but not much else. After all, what is generally recognized as "knowledge" is nothing but cataloging and assigning of names to events, things or persons and investigating their interrelationships.[1] If someone or something cannot be named, we say that we cannot identify them. Assigning names or labels is helpful for identification, but that does not automatically imply that we have knowledge of the labeled entity. *Acine gāch* is a tree that may be labeled – *acine*, literally "unrecognized," is a label, after all – but not necessarily known for what it really is. *Acine* clearly is not its true name.

The phrase *acine gāch* was originally used by Sri Ramakrishna himself. In the September 7, 1883, entry in *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, we find M. (as Mahendranath Gupta is better known) telling Sri Ramakrishna that he couldn't be compared to anyone else.

Sri Ramakrishna smiles and asks him whether he had heard of *acine gāch*. When M. says he hadn't, Sri Ramakrishna tells him that there is indeed such a tree and "nobody knows what it is." To which M. responds by saying, "Nobody knows you too. The more people understand you, the more will they be uplifted."[2]

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Sri Ramakrishna's analogy of *acine gāch* raises questions in M.'s mind. He begins to wonder whether Sri Ramakrishna used the analogy to refer to an avatār, Incarnation of God. Was Sri Ramakrishna referring to the play of God as a human being (*naralīlā*)? Is Sri Ramakrishna an avatār?

We can continue to wonder today alongside M. and ask similar questions. M. was not obviously the first to raise such questions and he won't be the last. Can we find the true name of the tree that is referred to as *acine gāch*? Can we find Sri Ramakrishna's true name? Can we know who Sri Ramakrishna really was? These questions are important and are the focus of reflection in this paper, in which I first examine the role of the mind in generating knowledge of the transcendent and in producing interpretations. I then briefly review how Sri Ramakrishna's life has been interpreted in the last hundred years. Finally, I make an effort to locate the real Ramakrishna or to discover the true identity of *acine gāch* in and through the mind and the interpretations it generates.

A Rewarding Mistake

The questions regarding the real nature of Ramakrishna reflect the classic dilemma that viewing life through the Vedantic lens presents us: how can we express the inexpressible? How can we conceptualize what lies beyond concepts? How can we name the unnameable? And the simple answer is, we cannot. We cannot name the unnameable and we cannot express the inexpressible. All names are little more than labels. All expressions are at best only approximations. All concepts are only props to string ideas together and support an intellectual enquiry. While none of these – names, expressions, concepts – can be mistaken for true knowledge, it cannot be denied that all of them contribute toward the attainment of knowledge.[3]

Using names, expressions and concepts to denote the truth that transcends them all is clearly a mistake. An ancient Sanskrit verse, sometimes attributed to Vyāsa, acknowledges this mistake and seeks

divine forgiveness in these words:

> In my meditations I have attributed forms to you who are formless. O Teacher of the world, by singing your glory I have denied the truth that you are inexpressible. Through my travels and pilgrimages I have ignored the truth that you are all-pervading. O Ruler of the universe, forgive these threefold mistakes of mine which violate your true nature.

No mistake is intrinsically useless, however. What is life if not a series of awakenings or a continual cascade of opportunities to learn? Not many look at life in this way, of course, and not everyone learns from their mistakes. Which is why we keep making the same mistakes over and over again. Which is why also history repeats itself both in collective life and in individual lives.

A truly religious person is always learning. Not for nothing did Sri Ramakrishna say, "As long as I live, so long do I learn." Swami Vivekananda echoed this teaching of his Guru when he said, "Learning is religion." If we are prepared to learn, then every mistake becomes a blessing. Every mistake makes us learn something new. If we must keep making mistakes – and at present it doesn't look like we have any choice – let us make new mistakes instead of recycling old ones. Every new mistake is an opportunity to learn something new. Every mistake can thus be rewarding if we are eager to learn.

Some mistakes are rewarding by their very nature. Several scenarios are presented in the ninth chapter of the Vedanta text *Pañcadaśī* to show that there are really two kinds of mistakes. One scenario is of a luminous light in a dark wooded area which two persons mistake for a gem. The light that the first person sees emerges from a chink in the wall of a cottage, so when he rushes there to grab the gem, he finds no gem. The light that the second person sees is in fact reflected from a truly precious gem, so when he rushes toward it, he is delighted to find the gem. In these examples, both the persons made a mistake: they mistook the light for a gem. Neither of them

had seen the gem. But the first mistake was a common mistake, an "unrewarding mistake" (*visamvādi-bhrama*) while the second one was a special kind of mistake, a "rewarding mistake" (samvādi-bhrama).[4]

Ascribing names to the nameless, expressing what is essentially inexpressible, and using concepts to denote what is beyond all concepts are mistakes all right, but these are rewarding mistakes in spiritual life. The three mistakes described in the prayer quoted above – meditating on forms of one who is formless, singing glories of one who is beyond all description, and making pilgrimages to see one who is all-pervading – are also "rewarding mistakes." We know from scriptures as also from the testimony of the enlightened ones of the past and present that these "mistakes" have been rewarded with faith, devotion, knowledge and, above all, the supreme consummation of life called spiritual freedom (*moksa*).[5] No better rewards exist.

Mind as Filter

We cannot but make such "mistakes" in spiritual life. The mind and the senses are the only instruments we have to find answers to existential questions related to life and what lies beyond. But these instruments, being material, are totally inadequate, since the answers to life's questions relate to the spirit, which transcends everything and is completely untouched by anything material. We learn from the Upanishads that the spirit is inexpressible and is beyond name and form and concepts. It is beyond the reach of the mind and the senses.[6] The mind then would seem to be the wrong instrument to help us know the spirit. Paradoxically, the Upanishads also inform us that the spirit can be attained only with the help of the mind.[7] How do we reconcile these mutually contradictory statements? We find the answer in Shankaracharya's commentary on the *Katha Upanishad*, where he points out that, although beyond the reach of an impure mind, the spirit can be known "by a pure mind."[8] That is what Sri Ramakrishna meant when he said that "pure mind, pure intellect, and pure Ātman are one and the same."[9]

The spirit, or Ātman, never really remains hidden. It is in and through the spirit that we are aware of everything else. Most of us are usually so focused on "everything else" that it is easy to overlook the constant presence of the spirit. This is somewhat like the presence of light which is generally taken for granted and hence ignored, but without which life would be almost impossible.

When an effort is made to know the spirit, the view is hazy, colored, even deceptive, because the mind is impure. The mind acts as a glass-paned window through which the spirit can be seen but not touched. The transparency of the glass depends on the purity of the mind. What makes the mind "impure" is the presence of desires for the material world. It makes the mind curved and less transparent. The result is that whatever the mind sees is not only not clear but also distorted. The mind acts as a colored lens and that changes the view of what gets in and what goes out through the mind. Since every mind is different, meaning each mind has its own individual color and curve, the perception and interpretation vary with every mind.

What the eyes see may be the same but how the different minds interpret what is seen is open to endless possibilities. That is the cause of the diversity and the differences we encounter all around us.

That is how the world is viewed through different paradigms in different wisdom traditions. In Vedanta itself it is possible to view the world in at least five distinct ways: as a cosmic sacrifice (*yajña*), as a cosmic play (*līlā*), as cosmic union (*yoga*), as a cosmic person (*virāt*), and as a cosmic mystery (māyā).[10]

There is also immense diversity in how one's own self is understood and, of course, how the Being that lies beyond the world and the self – often expressed in English through the overused but handy word "God" – is understood. Since everything is filtered through the same mind, the views in each instance are interrelated. If God is viewed as the father or the mother, then we become God's children and the world becomes a cosmic home; if God is the master, we become

God's servants and the world becomes God's kingdom or empire; if God is the Supreme Self (*paramātmā*) beyond name and form, then we become individualized selves (*jīvātmā*) with apparent names and forms, and the world becomes a projection (srsti), and so on.

The God which the mind conceives would remain too abstract and considerably out of reach unless we are able to represent God in something concrete, even if it is a symbol, or as someone we can relate to. Can God be engaged through feelings and somehow, at some level, grasped by the senses? The ethereal beauty of the colors splashed across the horizon at sunset and the innocent, pure smile of a baby, for instance, have filled people's hearts with awareness of something that lies beyond the boringness of this world. Getting to know people who are Godlike also makes God more than merely an uplifting idea. Such enlightened beings, who are said to be filled with God-consciousness, make God both real and accessible. The human tendency to grade, to distinguish and to categorize everything assigns different labels to these Godlike beings.

So we have a plethora of terms such as saviors, prophets, saints, incarnations. When we try to understand these Godlike beings through the filters of our minds, we unconsciously project our own phobias, fears, desires, hopes on their personalities. Look, for instance, to how Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, Caitanya, Ramakrishna, and others have been understood and portrayed.

Since we know little beyond bare historical facts of most of these personalities, how they are viewed is largely determined by how our minds understand them. It is the mind which transforms raw information into meaningful knowledge. Interpretation is a process of making meaning. Every one of us is an interpreter. We try to make sense of every bit of information that we take in. The mind is a processing unit. The quality of the interpretation depends on the quality of the mind. Those with clear and mature minds are able to produce clear and mature interpretations. It is helpful to remember

that in every interpretation, the personality being studied is named by the interpreter, viewed through the mental lens of the interpreter, and expressed in the language of the interpreter. The interpretation and the interpreter are distinct and yet inseparable. Every interpretation includes the shadow of a self-portrait and the ever-present possibility of the person whose life is being interpreted being overshadowed or even eclipsed by the interpreter.[11]

How do the interpretations of these Godlike people help us? In at least three ways.

First, these interpretations tell us a lot about the interpreters themselves and their concerns. Second, the interpretations may help us connect the Godlike person to our contemporary concerns and issues, thus revealing that the person has relevance beyond his or her time and social situation. Three, these interpretations may lead us to the real person hidden under the layers of ideas, thoughts and concepts that every interpretation abounds in.

Sri Ramakrishna's Interpreters

With this is mind, let us take a look at some of the prominent interpreters of Sri Ramakrishna in the last hundred years. The starting point for this exercise is the sources, which provide the raw material for interpretation.

The primary sources for Sri Ramakrishna are many, but three among them are major: M.'s *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita,* Swami Saradananda's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga,* and Ramchandra Dutta's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa Deber Jibanbrittanta.*

The *Kathamrita* is a record of Sri Ramakrishna's conversations, and the other two, the *Lilaprasanga* and the *Jibanbrittanta*, are biographies. These three books are not stenographic and sterile records of the events in Sri Ramakrishna's life and his words. These books pulsate with life, passion and inspiration, since they are written by those who knew Sri Ramakrishna personally, moved with him,

talked with him and were blessed by him. Even as M., Saradananda and Datta write about Sri Ramakrishna's life and words, they are simultaneously interpreting him for us.

Their books seek not only to provide information but also to educate and teach the reader. Through their books they share with us their understanding of Ramakrishna, which places them among the first and earliest interpreters of Ramakrishna.

Swami Saradananda's *Lilaprasanga*, which has remained to this day the most authentic and reliable research work on Ramakrishna's life, is not a conventional biography. Describing the nature of his book to an American friend on June 18, 1914, Swami Saradananda wrote:

> The book is not really on the life of Sri Ramakrishna but on Sri Ramakrishna as the spiritual guide and can be counted as a philosophical analysis of that side of his character only.[12]

Based on his own contact with Ramakrishna and viewing Ramakrishna's life against the backdrop of India's philosophical and cultural landscape, Saradananda places Ramakrishna in the realm of eternal *lilā*, the divine play of the avatār. He focuses his attention primarily on locating a unifying principle that would integrate both Ramakrishna's teachings as well as all the known events of his life. Saradananda finds that unifying principle in the concept of *bhāvamukha*, "the threshold of consciousness," which is his original contribution to the analysis and understanding of Ramakrishna's life.

Although the Kathamrita is primarily a record of Ramakrishna's conversations and M. took special care to keep himself as much out of the picture as possible, his interpretation of Ramakrishna's life and teachings is included in the book through several of M.'s reflections expressed in poetic Bengali suffused with devotion. Many of these reflections, mostly subtitled "In the Mind of the Attendant" (*Sevak Hridaye*), have unfortunately not been included in Swami Nikhilananda's English translation of the book. M.'s

interpretations can also be found in several observations he makes in the *Kathamrita* and usually phrasing them as questions. An example is the passage about acine gāch that I quoted at the very beginning of this paper. After the brief exchange with Ramakrishna regarding *acine gāch,* M. wonders whether Ramakrishna used the analogy to refer to an avatār and whether he was in fact referring to the play of God as a human being (*naralīlā*)? Through such interpretative questions, M. attempts to encourage the reader to probe further along those lines.

Ramchandra Dutta (along with Girish Chandra Ghosh) was among the first to declare that Sri Ramakrishna was an incarnation of God. In his book *Jibanbrittanta* the reader cannot miss Datta's firm conviction that Ramakrishna was the embodiment of "eternal and total being of Brahman" (*pūrna-brahma-sanātan*) and for this reason, according to Datta, all that was necessary for one's spiritual life was to remember Ramakrishna, meditate on him, and propagate his name. Datta interprets Ramakrishna's life through the lens of his own predominantly Vaisnava leanings, his language and style filled with his unquestioned love and reverence for Sri Ramakrishna.

Among the other primary sources on Ramakrishna are the conversations of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi (*Mayer Katha*), *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, and the recorded conversations of other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Although these books do not have Ramakrishna as their primary focus, the intelligent reader has no difficulty in seeing how Ramakrishna's life is being interpreted through the observations and comments of Holy Mother, Swamiji and the direct disciples.

All other books on and about Ramakrishna can only be considered as secondary sources. Such books have been published in many languages. Those written in English have not had greater numerical distribution than those written in several Indian languages, especially

Bengali, but the books in English have certainly been distributed over a larger geographical area. Partly due to this but mostly due to the fame of a few authors and the depth of their interpretations, some of the Ramakrishna books in English have left an indelible mark on Ramakrishna history.

Among the earliest in this class of interpretations is Max Müller's *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings*, first published in the year 1899. As a strong believer in the scientific study of religion, Müller believed that a comparative study would uncover hidden religious truths and was adamant that Christianity should be subjected to the same method of study as were employed in the study of other religions. Müller's belief that truth was available even outside Christianity had its limits, however, for he also noted that the history of the world was unconsciously progressing toward a universalized, liberal Christianity. Müller had genuine admiration for Hinduism's philosophical heritage but also an abiding interest in "purifying" Hinduism. He hoped that eventually Hinduism would be Christianized. To him it seemed that his natural allies in this were the members of Brahmo Samaj, the powerful reform movement in the nineteenth century India, which strongly denounced image-worship and vigorously preached monotheistic ideals.

Müller was impressed when he met Swami Vivekananda in Oxford and probably viewed Swamiji as a potential partner in his goal of purifying Hinduism. He offered to write a book on Sri Ramakrishna if he were given sufficient material to work with. Swamiji asked his brother disciples to supply the needed material, instructing them to include only the "universal aspect" of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings,[13] for he knew that Müller's appreciation, though genuine, had its limits: Müller was sure to see anything outside of his pre-existing worldview to be polluting true religion. Swami Saradananda put together whatever biographical material he could gather and Swami Ramakrishnananda collected some of the important sayings of Sri Ramakrishna, keeping in mind Swamiji's instruction.

Even then Müller was not entirely satisfied with the material he was sent and complained that there were too many "traditional elements" in it.

He divided his book into a lengthy biographical introduction and a collection of Ramakrishna's sayings and declared that "Vedanta-philosophy ... is the very marrow running through all the bones of Ramakrishna's doctrine."[14] Müller filled the biographical section with his own editorial comments, seemingly providing the adult, scholarly corrective to the "childish love of the miraculous."

On the whole, in spite of its occasional patronizing and chauvinistic tone, Müller's book is largely sympathetic and shows genuine interest in building a bridge across cultural and religious divides. As the best-known Indologist of his time, Müller's book brought immediate international recognition to Sri Ramakrishna and ensured serious interest from later Western scholars, among whom was the French writer Romain Rolland, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915.

Unlike Müller, Rolland had a wealth of translated material to use when he began his research. His source material included the early translations of the Kathamrita and the Lilaprasanga, Müller's *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings*, and Dhan Gopal Mukerji's exotic biography of Ramakrishna titled *The Face of Silence*. In addition, Rolland corresponded with Swami Shivananda (Mahapurush Maharaj), M. and Swami Ashokananda. He also received help from Swamiji's American disciples, Josephine MacLeod and Sister Christine. Rolland's heart longed for unity and harmony in a Europe devastated by World War I and what attracted him to Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings was the hope that Ramakrishna would provide the much-needed restorative and antidote to political madness and human suffering.

Although Rolland's book on Ramakrishna was written in French and first published in 1929, it was its English translation that received

wider circulation and acclaim. As a diehard humanist and idealist, Rolland assumed that Ramakrishna and other religious teachers shared with him what, according to him, was the one universal goal: "human unity through God."[15]

Compared to Müller's dry, analytical style, Rolland's is filled with passion and energy. He focuses more on Ramakrishna's life than his teachings and its larger meaning for humanity. Not overtly enthused by Sri Ramakrishna's mystical experience of the Divine as pervading everyone and everything, Rolland is concerned over what he felt was Ramakrishna's lack of engagement in human suffering. It must have taken a while before Rolland realized that his own ideology was at odds with Ramakrishna's worldview, which perceived the world as only temporarily remediable but intrinsically unfixable. We find that, not long after Rolland's book was published, he gave up his interest in religion and became increasingly involved in socialism and combating fascism through armed resistance.

Another great book on Ramakrishna, published almost 35 years later, was Christopher Isherwood's *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*. Written at the request of his teacher Swami Prabhavananda, Isherwood dedicates the book to him, describing him as "my guru, dear friend and literary collaborator for the past twenty-five years." Although a book of this nature was so different from the kind of books Isherwood had written and become famous for, it was nevertheless both a challenging and gratifying project for him. This is what Isherwood wrote in a 1946 essay: "[Ramakrishna] is the most interesting person to write about. The most interesting and the most difficult."[16] Eleven years later, in his diary entry of June 10, 1957, he writes: "I ask myself: What am I fit for, nowadays? What am I accomplishing? What does my life mean? And the answer seems to be I have to write that Ramakrishna book. That will sum up what my life has been about since the thirties."[17]

Isherwood's source materials were primarily the English

translations of the *Kathamrita* and the *Lilaprasanga*. Recognizing that his book's primary audience was likely to be Ramakrishna devotees and a much larger proportion of skeptical Western readers, Isherwood interprets Ramakrishna's life through the eyes of a skeptic, but also making it clear that he believed Ramakrishna to be an avatār. In order to remove misconceptions regarding mysticism, Isherwood emphasizes the ordinary in Ramakrishna's life to show that Ramakrishna's mystical experiences were an extension of what was inherent in ordinary human life, available to everyone if only they could open their hearts to it. Isherwood's book became hugely popular among Ramakrishna devotees and it attracted a sizable number of young men and women in the West, many of whom became lifelong devotees and a few among them eventually became monastics of the Ramakrishna Order.

The interpretations of Ramakrishna that emerged in the Western academic world in the 1970s present a different dynamic and a somewhat jarring change of tone from the generally admiring books of Müller, Rolland and Isherwood. While the earlier interpreters did not question the legitimacy of the sources they worked with, the Western academics in the 1970s were not prepared to assume the accuracy and trustworthiness of the source materials. The hermeneutic of empathy had been replaced by the hermeneutic of suspicion. The writings of Walter Neevel, Jeffrey Masson, Narasingha Sil, Malcolm McLean, and Jeffrey Kripal, among others, interpreted Ramakrishna's mystical experiences as caused by psychopathology, doubted that it was ever possible to transcend one's body-consciousness, and subjected Ramakrishna's words and experiences to Freudian psychoanalysis. Not surprisingly, their interpretations and conclusions were markedly different from the earlier ones. By and large, their interpretations circulated within and remained confined to the Western academic world, just as the earlier interpretations were preserved and studied primarily in the worldwide devotee circles. Only when the two worlds, academic and nonacademic, collided –

as it happened after the publication of the review of Kripal's *Kali's Child* in the Calcutta edition of *The Statesman* in 1997 – did it lead to controversy and protests, and much mud-throwing from both the sides. Not all academics, however, operated with the hermeneutic of suspicion. There were some notable exceptions, historian Amiya P. Sen, among them. In his *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal*, published in 1993, Sen offers an insightful interpretation of Ramakrishna's life and his role in reviving the Hindu tradition. Sen points out that Ramakrishna was a "many-layered personality" with "diverse possibilities latent in his life and message."[18]

The interpretations of Ramakrishna's life and teachings in the Ramakrishna Order after Swami Saradananda's *Lilaprasanga* came not through full-length biographies but through essays, editorials and books, the earliest among these were Swami Ghanananda's *Ramakrishna and His Unique Message*, Swami Nirvedananda's *Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance*, and Swami Gnaneswarananda's *Ramakrishna: The Man and the Power*.

In two essays published in 1962 and 1980, both published in the Order's Bengali journal *Udbodhan*, Swami Dhireshananda points out that any attempt to force Ramakrishna's life into the straitjacket of a single philosophy or tradition is bound to produce distortion. He writes that Ramakrishna was "the embodiment of infinite bhāvas" (*ananta-bhāvamay*) and raises an interesting question regarding the nature of Ramakrishna's first mystical experience of the Divine Mother. Through his extensive research, Swami Prabhananda has brought to light heretofore little known incidents from Ramakrishna's life, especially those from the untranscribed portions of M.'s diaries, and this has deepened and enriched our knowledge and understanding of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Bhajanananda's editorials in the *Prabuddha Bharata* have highlighted the significance and meaning of Ramakrishna's life, with insightful interpretations of the state of *bhāvamukha* and Ramakrishna's concept of *vijñāna*.

This is only a brief glimpse into some of the interpretations of Ramakrishna's life and teachings in English that have enriched the Ramakrishna literature.[19] These interpreters have helped us look at Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings through different perspectives and, while we may not agree with every interpretation we come across, it cannot be denied that each viewpoint helps us go back and compare it with our own viewpoint (if we have one), and see where the meeting of the two leads us.

The Utility of Interpretations

That's the whole point – isn't it? – of why interpretations are offered and why they are studied. It's not so much a matter of agreeing or not agreeing with, or accepting or rejecting, any interpretation. That's secondary. What is primary is the question: does this interpretation help me go closer to the truth, or the inner essence, of the person or the idea that is being interpreted.

It is possible to look at the raw information about a person's life as the raw material needed to build a house, such a bricks, mortar, wood and metal. Every interpretation is like a house built using the available material. The object of interpretation is not the house itself, but the one who lives in that house. What kind of a house gets built, it's style and design and quality, depends on the one who builds it. Ideally, the house should reflect the personality of the one living in it. How do we build a house for one whom we have never met? All that we have is some raw information about the events in the person's life and about what the person said on various occasions. In such a scenario, we have to imagine how that person must have been and then build a house that would best reflect the personality of its inhabitant. That is what every interpretation tries to do. When an architect is perfectly tuned to the vision and need of the client for whom the house is being designed and built, the style and nature of the house perfectly reflects the personality of the owner. When the architect uses his or her own vision, the house reflects the personality

of the architect, not of the owner. That is the difference between a good interpretation and a bad interpretation.

In Sri Ramakrishna's case, we can easily see the different interpretative-houses that were built for him by M., Saradananda, Ramchandra Dutta, Müller, Rolland, Isherwood and others. It is possible that we might find some of these houses as more likely residences of Ramakrishna than some others. It is also possible that the house you or I would build for him may be in some ways different from any of the houses others have built for him.

It is most essential never to forget that an interpretation of Ramakrishna is not Ramakrishna himself but only a house built for him. While the interpretation may give us some idea of the one who is living in the house, merely looking at the house and admiring it is never going to be enough. At some point, we will want to open the door, go in and meet Sri Ramakrishna directly. The house that makes us do this quickly and easily would be in some way the ideal house for us. That is how I see our relationship with Ramakrishna literature, specifically with the different interpretations of Ramakrishna's life and teachings that are now available and also with the interpretations that are to come in the future.

So long as we are only studying the interpretations – or only looking at the house from outside – the resident of the house will remain unknown. If asked, who lives in that house?, our best answer would be I don't know. I have seen the house and I know that a person lives in there but I have never seen him. I wouldn't be able to even recognize him. I don't know the real name of the person either. This is very similar to our standing before a tree and not knowing what tree it is. For us it will remain a tree that is not recognized, a tree whose name we don't know. The best we can do is to call it an *acine gāch.*

The purpose of studying the different interpretations of Ramakrishna is to see how different minds have responded to his life

and teachings – and see how our own minds respond to his life and teachings, and how our minds respond to the interpretations of these *other* minds. All of this can help us refine our own understanding, reassess our own conclusions, and help us build a house for Ramakrishna that we feel would best represent him, a house that would make it easier for us to walk in and meet with him face to face.

In order for us to do that, the filter of the mind must be cleaned repeatedly and regularly, the way Totapuri cleaned his metal water-pot.[20] When the filter of the mind becomes transparent, when the crookedness of the mind is eliminated, the mind just melts away. It becomes pure and indistinguishable from the Ātman. We enter the house of Ramakrishna and are in his presence. His presence is so powerful that our own presence is soon forgotten. The "I" disappears and along with it space and time. When space disappears, all that remains is "here." When time disappears, all that remains is "now." The *acine gāch* is no longer *acine*. We recognize it fully now because it has become our own true being. We still cannot name it but there is no need to do so. In order to name it, we will have to separate ourselves from it – and the separation would make it unrecognizable and unnameable again. What's the point?

M.'s question in the Kathamrita was whether Sri Ramakrishna was hinting at his being an avatār by referring to the *acine gāch*. M. certainly thought so and that does make sense. For, an avatār is a mysterious being, neither fully human nor fully divine, or fully human and fully divine at the same time. How can such a being be named? Who will be able to recognize a strange being like this? Narendranath, before he became Vivekananda, perhaps expressed it best when Sri Ramakrishna's physician Dr. Sarkar expressed his reservation about identifying Sri Ramakrishna as an avatār. Narendra said:

> We think of him [Sri Ramakrishna] as a person who is like God. Do you know what it is like? There is a point between

> the vegetable creation and the animal creation where it is very difficult to determine whether a particular thing is a vegetable or an animal. Likewise, there is a stage between the human-world and the God-world where it is extremely hard to say whether a person is man or God. I don't say that Ramakrishna is God. What I am saying is that he is a Godlike man.[21]

Years later, speaking with his disciple Sarat Chandra Chakravarty, Swamiji refused to categorize Sri Ramakrishna as avatār, not because he did not view him as such, but to teach his disciple that labeling Ramakrishna as an avatār would still be a distortion. It still won't be the real name of Ramakrishna. It still don't describe Ramakrishna accurately.

The concept of an avatār is still a concept. It is not Ramakrishna's real nature. An avatār is also an interpretation, a brilliantly decorative piece perhaps at the entrance to Ramakrishna's true home. Swamiji said that he believed Ramakrishna to be "even greater" than those who are labeled avatārs. He told Sarat Chandra:

> To reestablish dharma, there come Mahāpurushas (great teachers of humanity), suited to the needs of the times and society. Call them what you will – either Mahāpurushas or Avatārs – it matters little. They reveal in their lives the ideal. Then, by degrees, shapes are moulded in their matrices – men are made! Gradually, sects arise and spread. As time goes on, these sects degenerate, and similar reformers come again. This has been the law flowing in uninterrupted succession, like a current, down the ages.

When Sarat Chandra asked Swamiji why he didn't preach Sri Ramakrishna as an avatār, Swamiji responded in this way:

> Truly, I tell you, I have understood him very little. He appears to me to have been so great that, whenever I have to speak

> anything of him, I am afraid lest I ignore or explain away the truth, lest my little power does not suffice, lest in trying to extol him I present his picture by painting him according to my lights and belittle him thereby![22]

We can understand Swamiji's hesitation in applying the label avatār to Sri Ramakrishna, for that description still falls too short of who Sri Ramakrishna really was.

It is possible that Sri Ramakrishna asked M. about acine gāch not to suggest that he was an avatār, but to remind M. that who Ramakrishna truly was and is would forever remain unknown. Ramakrishna would always remain the *acine gāch*. Any attempt to label him can prove elusive. To know him, we have to be him. To the extent our minds get purified and melt into the being of Ramakrishna, what he truly is would be known in the depths of our hearts. No interpretation is needed there but every interpretation can help us get there. As Swamiji wrote in his inspired poem "The Hymn to Samadhi":

> Void merged into void – beyond speech and mind!
> Whose heart understands, he verily does.[23]

Notes and References

1 In Vedanta this is known as "indirect knowledge" (*paroksa jñāna*)

2 Mahendranath Gupta, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, Kolkata: Udbodhan Karyalaya, 1986, p. 304

3 By "true" knowledge I mean what is known as "direct knowledge" (*aparoksa jñāna*), which is mystical experience unmediated through the mind and the senses.

4 See Vidyaranya Swami, *Pañcadaśī*, 9.1-6

5 See *Pañcadaśī*, 9.10-13

6 *Kena Upanishad*, 1.3 and *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 2.4.1

7 *Katha Upanishad*, 2.1.11

8 Shankarachrya's commentary on *Katha Upanishad*, 2.1.11

9 *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, pp. 153, 401, 1021

10 See Swami Tyagananda, "Samsara or the World Phenomenon: Different Perspectives," *Prabuddha Bharata*, December 1999, pp. 897-903

11 See David Richards, *Masks of Difference: Cultural Representations in Literature, Anthropology and Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 289

12 Swami Prabhananda, *Saradananda Carit* (Bengali), Kolkata: Udbodhan Karyalay, 1997, p. 274

13 *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1976, Vol. 6, p. 364

14 Max Müller, *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings*, New York: AMS Press, 1975, p. 70

15 Romain Rolland, *Life of Ramakrishna*, tr. E. F. Malcolm-Smith, 7th ed., Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965, p. 8

16 Christopher Isherwood, "The Problem of the Religious Novel," in *Vedanta and the West*, 9 (Mar-Apr, 1946), p. 61

17 Katherine Bucknell, ed., *Christopher Isherwood Diaries: Volume One: 1939–1960*, New York: HarperCollins, 1997, p. 703

18 Amiya P. Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 310

19 For an extensive treatment of this subject, see the chapter titled "Ramakrishna Scholarship: A Brief History" in Swami Tyagananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana, *Interpreting Ramakrishna: Kali's Child Revisited*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2010, pp.1-92

20 *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, pp. 717, 856

21 His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols., Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1979, pp. 152–53

22 *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 5, pp. 389-90

23 *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 4, p. 498

Sri Ramakrishna: the Friend, Philosopher and Guide

Pravrajika Bhaswaraprana

Sri Ramakrishna cannot be considered as the exponent of any particular philosophical theory. He rather preached a truth, universal and eternal, within which all the philosophical speculations, Indian as well as Western, can happily be reconciled.

Indian philosophy except Carvaka is out and out spiritual in nature in the sense that all the philosophical arguments are heading towards the establishment of some transcendental spiritual reality surpassing the ephemeral sensuous world of objects. However, each one of these expositions is subject to the defect of one-sidedness because of preaching exclusively either dualism or pluralism or monism and the path of realization as either Jnana or Bhakti or Karma or Yoga.

The Western philosophers, unlike Indians, weave out an intellectual network to explain the world, life and experiences within. Their theories are developed, in most cases, through a dialectical process viz. thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Every exposition automatically invites a polemic against it, and these two are synthesized into a third one. These may be taken as mere intellectual exercises in comparison with the spiritual foundation of Indian thought. That is why we do not need to have a separate philosophy of religion as we find in the Western system.

In Sri Ramakrishna, we find not a synthesis but a perfect harmony of all these opinions and of all the paths, traditionally

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conceived as different from each other, leading to the realization of reality. He practiced each one of them and found them equally true. Not only this, we may rightly say, that the different disciplines of thought cherished by the western philosophers, viz. idealism, realism, pragmatism etc. were exemplified in his life. As a Vedantin he proved himself a perfect idealist, and yet he remained realistic and pragmatic in his dealing with the factual material world. He was found to be a dualist in worshipping goddess Kali as the creator of this world; but in his sermons he seemed to be a perfect qualified monist. For him God was both transcendent and immanent. The originality of his thinking should be traced to this harmonizing outlook and capacity. Swami Vivekananda once said that the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna should be as original in their thinking and action as their master was.

In 19th century Bengal, Hinduism as a religion was a vague concept. Social customs, rituals, caste system and sectarianism overshadowed the true religious ideals preached by scriptures like the Upanishads and the Bhagavadgita. Common people in society followed rituals practiced by the priests and neglected the lofty ideals of immortality and universality of human self. As the famous historian Arnold Toynbee points out, Bengal of the 19th century was at a crossroads where the Western ideas introduced by the English challenged the age-old conventional ideas of religion, culture and education. This condition, says Toynbee, gave birth to Brahmo religion that was an amalgamation of the Upanishadic ideal of unity of the Self and the Christian ideal of morality and way of life. This new religious thought free from sectarian beliefs and dogmas initiated social and religious reformation and thus attracted the young educated generation who came to be known as 'Young Bengal'. But because of their strong Christian leaning, the Brahmos became dissociated from the common Hindu populace and thus lost their support.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the leader of Arya Samaj, came forward with aggressive Hinduism based on national feelings. The Theosophist movement too came into prominence around the same time. However, neither orthodox Hinduism nor the modern outlook of Brahmos could convince and change the major part of society. This task was meant for a realized soul, an incarnation of God with extraordinary talents, infinite love and sympathy for ailing humanity, and a natural dispassion for worldly things and enjoyments. By divine dispensation, such a personality appeared in the form of Sri Ramakrishna. He preached through his life and teachings not a theory but a noble truth that was eternal and universal and touched the hearts of everyone irrespective of caste, creed and religion.

Sri Ramakrishna declared that each religion if practiced earnestly with pure love and devotion, and without disrespect or malice towards other religious faiths, must lead to the vision of Reality. The credit for linking God with the material world solely goes to Sri Ramakrishna. He wonderfully bridged the two worlds of matter and spirit, which until then were conceived as separate. Once, Swami Brahmananda pointed out that the most significant task done by Sri Ramakrishna for the well-being of human race was to unite the 'Jivaloka' with the 'Shivaloka' so that one can move from the former to the latter without breaking the journey and without rejecting the former altogether. This was surely a remarkable progress from the traditional concept of spiritual life.

In consequence, Sri Ramakrishna was expected to preach qualified monism or Vishistadvaitavada. But when we follow his line of thought to the end, we find that though he started his religious life with dualism by worshipping Goddess Kali, the universal mother, he reached pure monism or Kebaladvaitavada via qualified monism. Swami Vivekananda clarifies the point by

saying that Dvaita, Vishistadvaita, and Advaita are but three steps towards the knowledge of Highest Truth, or Absolute Reality or Brahman which is the final destination of each individual soul. Sri Sarada Devi, the spiritual consort of Sri Ramakrishna, affirmed that he was a perfect non-dualist or Advaitavadi. So unlike previous Hindu philosophers like Gautama, Kanada, Kapila, Shankaracharya and others, Sri Ramakrishna harmonized all the different 'isms' in his spiritual life. In the history of India or even in the history of the world, he stands as an illustrious figure who practiced in his everyday life all the different paths leading to God-vision viz. Jnana, Karma, Bhakti and Yoga.

Sri Ramakrishna worshipped Kali not only as a transcendent deity who is the creator and preserver of this world, but as an immanent 'chit satta' in every being, the Primordial Power or Brahma Shakti identical with Brahman, the Supreme Consciousness. He did not merely theorize about this truth, but actually visualized it. Therefore, in his philosophy man is potential God or God living and moving in human form. This led to his famous statement: "To serve man is to serve God." He asked Swami Vivekananda to worship God through such service. He weaned Swamiji away from his natural inclination towards 'Dhyana' and 'Samadhi' and engaged him in the service of man as the living image of God. Although Sri Ramakrishna was described as 'God intoxicated person' and his philosophy of life as essentially spiritual, yet he did not deny the mundane world as totally false. We find in him a great sympathy and love for the suffering humanity. He toiled hard to free mankind from its bondage and misery. This broad, humanistic outlook won him the hearts of the intelligentsia who were steering the Bengal Renaissance that sought to restore the dignity of man and his labour, to improve the condition of women in society, and to validate traditional religious customs and beliefs by applying reasoned doubt and arguments.

The Upanishads never advocated segregating religion from social rights and duties. But this democratic cultural heritage was lost down the passage of ages. Sri Ramakrishna's teachings once again brought the life-elevating message that united religion with social welfare. Advocating this teaching Swami Vivekananda declared, "forget not that the social order is but the reflex of the infinite universal Motherhood, forget not the lower classes, the ignorant, the poor, the illiterate, the cobbler, the sweeper are thy flesh and blood, thy brothers..."[1]

Even after their relationship had become deep, Narendranath continued to doubt Sri Ramakrishna's visions of God. He repeatedly questioned and cross-examined his guru's perceptions of the Super-Sensuous Reality. But Sri Ramakrishna was never annoyed with Narendranath, for he believed that any perfect knowledge must stand the test of truth through repeated doubts and criticism. So he always accepted Narendranath's challenges and always won the case. Isherwood very intelligently remarks that "among many tremendous attributes of Swami Vivekananda, the great one that he had for us, was his capacity to be a doubter and when a person like Vivekananda was converted at the hands of Ramakrishna, the whole of the 19th century was altered."[2] History, no doubt, supports this statement.

After being fully convinced of his guru's extraordinary godlike nature, Vivekananda sought his blessings to remain immersed in the divine bliss of samadhi. But Sri Ramakrishna rebuked him and pointed out his duty to serve men and women as living images of God. By the grace of his guru, Swami Vivekananda realized the truth of this call and later said, "we call them God whom the ignorant call man." This is indeed Practical Vedanta. It is the scientific application of religious truths and experiences in everyday social life, thus creating an uplifting transformation in society.

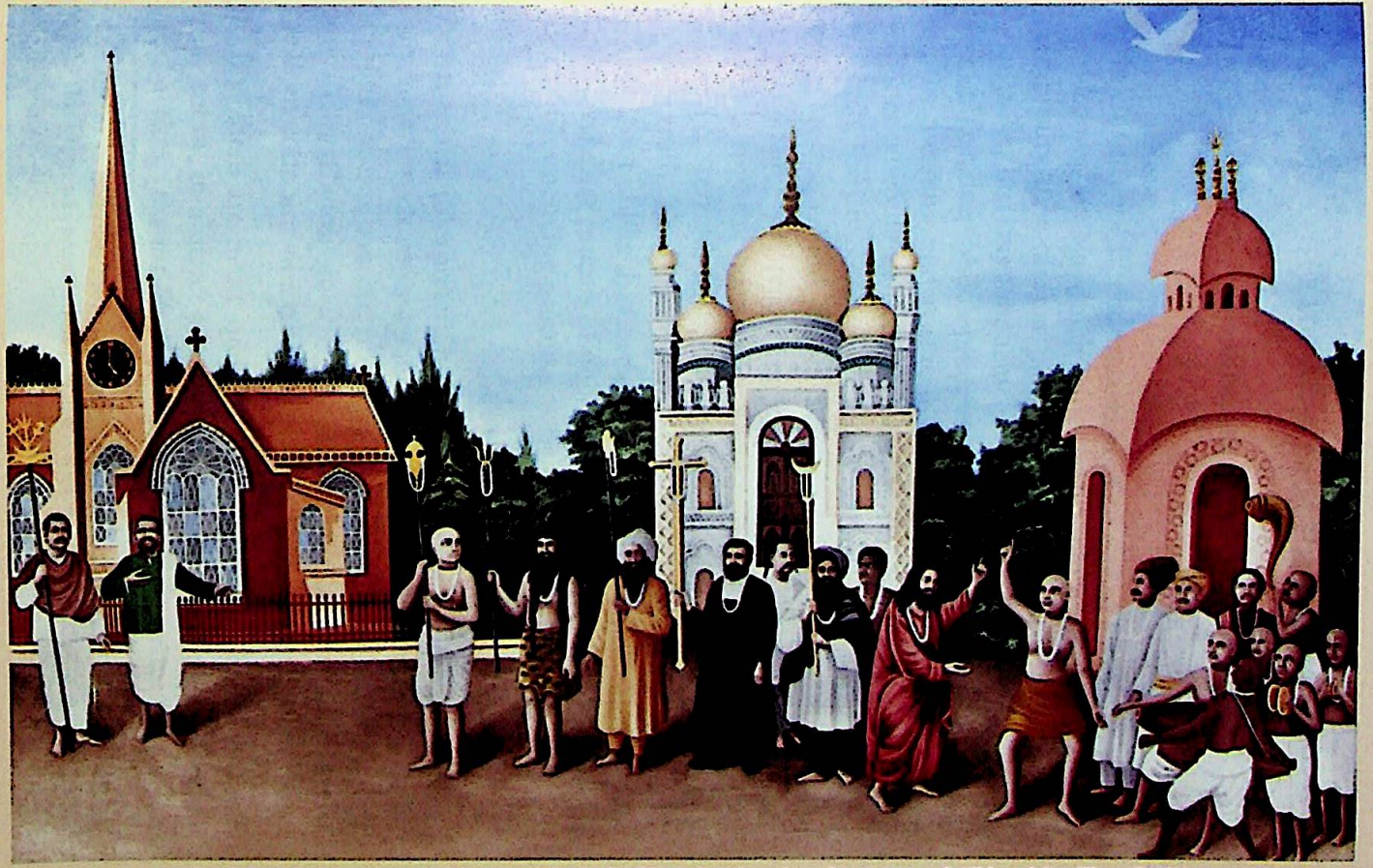
In the middle of 19th century Auguste Comte, the famous French philosopher, envisaged in line with the Western Renaissance, a positivist theory concerning humanism and social welfare which sought to create a society with better human beings. In comparison, Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy proves to be more generous and uplifting because he wanted to raise man not only to the standard of a better man – 'Narottama'— but to that of a divine man – 'Narayana' – as per spiritual tradition of India. Hence, the philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna may be seen as preaching humanistic spiritualism.

Notes and References

1 Swami Vivekananda, "Modern India" in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama: Calcutta, 1989, Vol. 4, p. 480

2 Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, 1959, Simon and Schuster: New York

Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas



Sri Ramakrishna explaining to Keshab Chandra Sen his doctrine of "*Yato Mat Tato Path*"
— as many views so many ways, a painting commissioned in 1882 by Surendranath Mitra

Yato Mat Tato Path

Jitendranath Mohanty

In this paper I intend to comment on one of Sri Ramakrishna's well-known sayings which both by virtue of its simplicity and its complexity of meanings, has appealed to scholars and ordinary men alike. But this simplicity of meanings and appeal to ordinary men hide a deep philosophical truth. In this paper, I would search for the meaning, and as a consequence for that truth. The puzzling experience would be that the more we search for its meaning and its truth, the deeper our search becomes, and we feel like pursuing our goal deeper and deeper. We seem to go deeper and deeper, always losing and recovering again and again. We will not give up. Philosophical questioning never stops, we discover every new meanings, and the simple dictum seems to become a deeper and deeper truth. The dictum then ceases to be a mere simple popular dictum, not unlike the Cartesian "Cogito Ergo Sum", and becomes a never-ending process of philosophical self-reflection. Now let us begin this unending process.

I

An initial interpretation may be as follows. '*Mat*' means not any view, but clearly religious point of view. '*Path*', meaning 'path', signifies in this context, not merely any path, but a religious path towards a religious goal. The implication is that there is a ***common goal***, an endpoint which can be reduced by many alternative paths.

But there are many questions that arise here. By 'paths' one may mean, in abstract generalities, paths of knowledge, devotion and action (*jnana*, *bhakti* and *karma*), each permitting some

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differentiations. Or, one may mean all and every historical religion (such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism etc.) each of which contains internal differentiations. These two lists may not coincide i.e. such that to each member of the first list there corresponds one and only one of the second list.

But do all these paths, understood either way, lead to the same goal? And what is this same goal? Is it God-realization? No, for Buddhism does not believe in God and so does not aim at God-realization. Advaita Vedanta aims not at God-realization, but at *moksa* or spiritual freedom. You can interpret it to mean God-realization, or interpret God-realization to mean freedom, but that would be an arbitrary choice.

The idea of *moksa* or *nirvana* is interpreted differently in different systems. The God of a Vaishnava could not be the same as that of an Advaitin, the God of a Christian can not be identical with the God of a Hindu. A Hindu strives after release from the chain of *karma*, a Christian after a place in Heaven. The identity of God across these differentiations is not self evident. Faced with this kind of questions, the universalist may adopt the following strategy.

II

Let us distinguish between the real ultimate goal, and the way the goal is conceived within a system. This distinction derives from the modern semantic distinction between 'reference' and 'meaning'. The former is the same in all religions, the latter varies from religion to religion. But what is this *real ultimate goal*? There are three ways of conceiving this *real ultimate goal*, which are:

(1) transformation of finite human existence;
(2) freedom from suffering and pain; and
(3) unity of the finite and the infinite, of matter and spirit.

I leave to the readers if this essay (originally, to the hearers of the lecture) to think whether such general characteristics of the ultimate goal will meet their approval. You will find that you will

immediately speak about this goal in a language that is admissible within your religion.

This solution, if it is one, gives you the assurance of an ultimate unity, but does not succeed in fulfilling that assurance.

III

The universalist, sometimes makes a strong claim: all religions are, in essence, the same. I wish to reflect on this belief.

To start with, there are two alternatives. One may either make it true by reducing the essence to a minimal property, or one may take a more enriched essence, and the thesis then in that case, is found to be not true. Take the case of religion. The minimum essence may be taken to be sacredness. But then the essence of religion, which we have taken to be sacredness, is not by itself a religion. What does a religion need, in addition to sacredness, in order to be a religion? A religion, it seems, contains:

(i) religious experience,

(ii) texts, revelations, scriptures,

(iii) rituals and liturgies, and

(iv) a community, i.e. *a public space* constructed by a community of believers.

Prospect of a unity amongst religions is more promising with (i). Experiences as such do not conflict. In their purity, they lift a person into another dimension of experience. Their linguistic articulations drew from (ii), and therefore differ. But they do not conflict.

Some of the seeming conflicts at the level of (ii) are due to different languages. The use of Sanskrit, Arabia, Hebrew, eg. Each brings with it its own ontological commitments. Rituals and liturgies i.e. (iii) evolve in time, derive from local needs and demands, so that the sanctity there is derived but not original. No. (iv), i.e. the community of believers, with its sacred space and sacred time, is a construction, and gives the essential "sacredness" of religious experience a ***habitat***

with the profane world. But it is here that there is a possible origin of conflict, as between political powers prevailing over different religions.

We then begin to see that the reasons for conflict amongst religions are not many, but rather in the constructed and historically interpreted messages, which lie deep in the nature of a religion.

IV

Harmony amongst religions is to be brought about by continuing conversations. Mere coexistence and toleration are not enough. By genuine conversation we can bring the harmony about.

But what is *genuine conversation*? What does it mean?

It aims – let me begin – not at gathering information from the other, but rather at understanding the other. In this situation, the first requirement is *a sense of respect for the other*, and *a sense of humility before him*.

The goal is *not to prove anything*, not even to prove the unity of all religions, but to experience within one's heart the truth of the other. It is said of the poet Wordsworth that he met John Keats for a conversation with him, sat on the opposite sides of a tree in a wood, without talking, and when departing thanked him for a wonderful conversation.

I can empty my mind of all beliefs, and let the other flow in. This is the highest experience of the other.

An *understanding* of the other, at a more theoretical level, requires that I bracket my own beliefs. I do not evaluate, *judge the other's truth* (e.g. can an immediate experience be *true*?), but take his beliefs as *meanings*, as *noemata* which claim to be true. In this way, I can *empathise* with his way of looking at things. Empathising with the other, and thereby transcending the limits of one's own perspective, is necessary for a rational point of view. The unity of individual perspectives yields a collective community's point of view.

V

But there are many such collective points of view. A religion represents one such. How can we transcend it?

Each religion (R1), one may take it, has a world-perspective (W1). We may represent this correlation thus:

$$R1 \rightarrow W1$$
$$R2 \rightarrow W2$$
$$R3 \rightarrow W3$$

Let R's stand for a religion and W's stand for a world-perspective. How can I harmonise them, if I belong to only one R? If I do not belong to a R, I have no inner appreciation of what it is to be within a R.

An *irreligious harmony* is from the outside. A religious harmony of R's has to be from the inside. But how is this possible? There are several alternatives: Let each alternative be symbolised by an abstract rationality, such that

X is an abstract rationality: these R's have a common essence.

X is an additive rationality: R1 + R2 + R3 + ...

X is a disjunctive rationality: R1 or R2 or R3 or ....

Or, the three may be called:

Exclusivism
Inclusivism
Pluralism → Disjunctivism → Perspectivism

Stages: (a) Emergence of a common core of overlapping of the Conversation;

(b) Not dialectical argumentation for or against a position, but by going beyond the positions to seek to bring the matter itself to intuitive givenness;

(c) Vertical Vernunft

vs.

Horizontal Vernunft — Ubergange

Or

Transversal Reason — Transitions
Mediations

Finally, this leads to *interstices of Theories*:

Post-modernism vs. Modernism
↓ ↓
Transversal Unity Vertical Unity

Inter religious Conversation – I have developed a quick sketch of inter religious conversation. It is not to be one time affair to settle upon a few truths and to pass a set of resolutions as in a conference. It is to be an ongoing affair with its own successes and failures.

I can accordingly imagine a series of mutual reflections:

In Rn are reflected R1, R2, R3, ...,

In Rn+1 are reflected the other R's,

So in Rn, Rn+1, the ideal development would be: Each would contain an understanding of the other.

VI

Now, think how far we are from and also how near are we to the dictum "Yato mat, tato path".

"As many views (mat), so many paths" does not mean "All paths lead to the same goal", but promises some kind of unity amongst the various goals.

That is to say, some kind of unity amongst the various worlds. Since we are thinking today in the post-modern era, this means a sort of identity between thinking and speaking.

This tentative promise has to be developed to explicate the full sense of post-modern identity of thinking and speaking to an achievable goal. This promise has to be further developed in a future essay.

Impact of Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas

Pradyot Kumar Mukhopadhyay

This paper has three major parts. In order to answer the question what impact Ramakrishna's ideas have on us now we need to discuss first the ideas of Ramakrishna. This constitutes the first part of our discussion in which we mainly concentrate on analyzing the expression "Ramakrishna's idea" and on the sources from which we can know what these ideas are. In the next two parts we discuss very briefly some concrete ideas we associate with Ramakrishna and what impact his ideas in general have on us today.

Part I

Making sense of "Ramakrishna's ideas"

I. i) Sources of our knowledge of Ramakrishna's Ideas

For our purpose it is necessary to begin by distinguishing the following two points even though they are closely related to each other: (a) Who Ramakrishna was or what sort of person he was and secondly (b) What were Ramakrishna's ideas. The question of relation between them is important in the sense that once we know the answer to one the other point gets substantially clarified. However, there is problem also. For example it is not easy to decide their relative priority. Knowing a person first enables us to know his ideas or at least know his ideas better. Is it possible, one can ask the question, to know a person without knowing the ideas we associate with him? Does our knowledge of a person, *obtained independently,* determine which Idea we associate with the person? Or is it that our

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idea of the person is determined or even constituted by which group of ideas we associate with him. In certain concrete situations it is difficult to decide whether our idea of the person is incompatible with our proposed attribution of a certain idea to him/her or the incompatibility is among the ideas we associate with him/her. To give an example, one's knowledge that Ramakrishna is Paramahamsa does not allow one to associate the idea of his being a social reformer. Similarly persons quarrelling over the issue whether Ramakrishna was an *avatar* or not may be in fact quarreling, unknowingly perhaps, about the idea of *avatar*. Some are inclined to find in Ramakrishna a person who is a perfect embodiment of classical Hinduism; his life and words gave clear expression to classical Hinduism without vengeance or apology. Anyway, for the present it is enough for us to note that (a) and (b) are different though related and postpone the discussion of the associated problems cited above.

There were people (P_1) who had the opportunity of directly observing the way Ramakrishna lived and behaved; they had also the opportunity of hearing firsthand how and what he spoke. Their knowledge of (a) and (b) were based on (e_1) the evidence of direct experience. We (P_2) who are not that lucky, got our knowledge of (a) and (b) indirectly and it is based on or derived from different sorts of sources or evidence. Of these the most dependable seems to be (e_2) the evidence of written records left by (P_1), particularly Ramakrishna's close disciples. We will ignore for the present the fact that within the class (P_1) there were all sorts of different individuals and their individual differences often affected the evidence value of the writings they left behind. For example the works like *Kathamrita* and *Punthi* are of a different kind than *Lilaprasanga*. The first two are likely to be rated higher, by historians in particular, in consideration of their evidence value than the third one as it differs importantly from the first two. For the third book is not, nor is intended to be, *just* the records of events relating to Ramakrishna and of his talks. This is not to deny that the accounts of the same event, say

Ramakrishna's meeting with Vidyasagar, we find in the first two books are significantly different. This shows that the accounts left by people of the sort (P_1) are not or may not be wholly objective. *Kathamrita* is likely to be viewed as more dependable because of its detached style. But in it also the recorder has occasionally included personal observations and impressions. However, we can clearly and surely identify where he did so. This makes the book the least misleading when we seek objective information about Ramakrishna. Nonetheless considerations like the one just noted requires that (P_2) use even (e_2) with due caution.

Even when their knowledge of (a) and (b) are based on best possible, though different kinds of, evidence, (P_2)'s knowledge of (b) is quite likely to be different from (P_1)'s knowledge of the same. In case of (P_2) knowing (b) will be a case of *imputing* certain ideas to Ramakrishna. People would want to distinguish between knowing Ramakrishna's ideas and imputing ideas to Ramakrishna. (We will ignore here the point that it may as well be correct to say that (P_1)'s knowledge in question is also a case of imputation on the strength of direct observation etc. For nobody can observe the ideas of another person.) Anyway, the knowledge or imputation of (b) on the part of (P_2) can go beyond just what is described in the works which constitute (e_2). Anyone who takes all the ideas, derived from (e_2) [or, wherever possible from both (e_1) and (e_2)], together and follows the logical development or implications of them, and this is what constitutes (e_3), may arrive at certain further truths of the kind (a), say (a_1), or of the kind (b), say (b_1). Such a person cannot help testing truths of (a) and (b) type against (e_3) as well. To sum up, the ideal system of "Ideas of Ramakrishna" as (P_2) can at any time have is the comprehensive and consistent set of ideas, if there be any, of (a) and (b) based on (e_2) together with (a_1) and (b_1) derived from (e_3). Some persons belonging to group (P_2) are liberal; in practice they do not distinguish much between books of the type *Kathamrita* and those of the type *Lilaprasanga*.

I. ii) Why prefer (e_2) and (e_3)

The second thing we wish to clarify at the beginning is the severe constraints under which we discuss here the issue relating to Ramakrishna's ideas and their impact on us today. We do not have adequate scholarship in the field of Ramakrishna literature. There are many individuals whose taste prevented them from acquiring such scholarship. They read little more than Sri Ramakrishna's *own words* as recorded by his direct disciples. They find no taste for secondary literature which seeks to *explaining* and even *defending* Ramakrishna's views and conduct. Even when the authors of such works do not mean it, their works strike others as attempts, on the part of their authors, to project themselves more than the Mahapurusa they are writing on or about. This is true not only about recommendatory works; sometimes (unnecessary) critical writings about Mahapurusas have behind them the authors' desire to draw people's attention to themselves. Those who do not have much taste for secondary literature on great men argue that great men are great not because they could be defended by others but just because they do not need such defence. Independent of any propaganda or supporting literature they are great and are recognized by many (who really matter) to be so. Determined by their taste in the matter some people feel less inclined to read writings on or about Ramakrishna, which appear to spend more time on expounding the author's own view than the views of Ramakrishna directly. This does not suit the taste of these men. Secondly, such works often turn out to be conscious or unconscious project on the part of their authors, of popularizing the great man in question or undertaking an exercise of image building in favour of the great man. These men often offer a third argument also. Unlike many other great men Ramakrishna is justly famous for his style of easy and direct communication using simple words. He is a standing refutation of the belief that profound thoughts cannot be adequately and clearly communicated except in difficult language which can be understood by only a few learned scholars or audience only. It sometimes appears that whatever else works

which attempt to *explain* Ramakrishna's words do, they hardly ever succeed in shedding more light on what Ramakrishna said or did. It is beyond the power of others, even when they are his disciples or great scholars, to make the ideas of Ramakrishna clearer or more appealing.

I. iii) Meaning of the expression "Ramakrishna's Idea"

The expression like "Ramakrishna's ideas" or, more generally, "idea *i* of an x" needs some clarification. Sometimes when we say of an idea that it is "x's idea" we mean x is the *inventor* of that idea. It is in this sense that space time relativity is said to be Einstein's idea – idea invented by Einstein. Not only we have learnt it from Einstein, nobody else including Einstein himself learnt it from any other source. The idea of heliocentric planetary system is not in this sense the idea of Copernicus. For, Aristarchus had this idea some seventeen centuries before Copernicus and further it was known to many people that Aristarchus had it. There is a second sense of the expression "x's idea". In this sense an idea may be said to be x's idea if x happens to *own* it or entertain it (or happen to have it as an episodic state of his mind at the moment, say). We sometimes say "my idea in the matter is different". We say this when we differ from others in the matter, have a different opinion or view of the matter. We may not be the inventor of this view or idea, say, the idea of geocentric planetary system; we may even know who the inventor is. Still we say, if it is felt necessary, that our idea in the matter, say of planetary system, is different, different from the idea Ptolemy or his followers entertained. In these cases "my idea" means no more than that *I have* this idea or I am an *owner* this idea, I entertain this idea; the idea is an episodic or dispositional state of my mind. So far an idea *belongs* to the person with whom we associate it or to whom we impute it provided he is either its owner or an inventor. Every inventor of an idea is the owner of it too. But every owner, in the sense of entertainer, of an idea is not an inventor. There may be innumerable owners of an idea but only one inventor.

Many of the ideas we tend to associate with Sri Ramakrishna and often describe as Ramakrishna's ideas are not his ideas in the sense that he is the inventor of them. This is a fact, though I do not want to make just a factual or historical statement. When I say this is a fact I mean to say about the so-called ideas of Ramakrishna what someone else has said about Vivekananda's ideas. One of Vivekananda's close followers said that none of the things Vivekananda preached or taught originated with him. Even if he was not born those thoughts would be there and would remain true and valid as before and independent of him. The ideas Vivekananda taught were not traced to even Sri Ramakrishna, even if he heard them from Ramakrishna for the first time. These ideas were there even before Sri Ramakrishna was born. We however should not deny the possibility of two men, unknown to each other and perhaps separated in time and space, discovering what we know today to be the same idea. So some, not necessarily different from the inventor himself, may know or claim himself to be the owner of an idea of which there is another inventor in the same sense. What prevents one from being the inventor of an idea, or from claiming oneself to be the inventor, is his *knowledge* that someone else has already invented it. Some may think that it is quite possible for Sri Ramakrishna to entertain many ideas on his own, be the inventor of those ideas; though unknown to him those ideas were already there and known to be so by many. This is a real possibility for Sri Ramakrishna was a great mind even though he was not educated in the conventional sense. But it should be remembered that though he did not have formal education Sri Ramakrishna was exposed to a great variety of literature or ideas available in those literatures. These literatures include not only the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads,* the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* but also books like *Imitation of Christ.* In fine, many ideas we associate with Ramakrishna and claim to be Ramakrishna's ideas are ideas which he entertained but which he did not invent. And being the man he was (embodiment of classical Indian culture and its cardinal virtues) he would not have claimed himself to be the inventor or

them. To give just one example, one of the famous ideas we associate with Ramakrishna is known to be already there in the celebrated hymn to Lord Siva composed by Puspadanta.

I. iv) One answer to (a)

Sri Ramakrishna was born in the nineteenth century and was alive during the greater part of it. But his living and thinking were not in the least shaped or contaminated by European influences which acted on many of his contemporaries, particularly some of those who had the benefit of Western education in the newly started institutions of learning. Ramakrishna remained, at least in our view, one of the rare few authentic representatives of classical Indian culture, particularly India's religious and spiritual culture. This has more significance than ordinarily meet our eyes. When we said that the ideas we often associate with Ramakrishna were not his ideas (in the sense or senses described), though many would have us believe that these ideas originated with Ramakrishna, we did not want to make just a historical or factual statement. Our purpose primarily was to bring to our awareness a certain deep cultural difference in the ways people think and act in different traditions or cultures. Modern Europe (and modern India under the influence of modern Europe) and classical India are two such cultural traditions. Our *second* related purpose was to suggest that we would turn Ramakrishna or our idea of him, a representative of classical Hindu culture, inconsistent, if we described him (with his assumed approval) as the originator of many of the ideas we associate with him.

Whereas modern culture is said to be seized by the craze for originality and individualism, the classical culture of India has always been free from this. Both in belief and practice (classical) Indians were ever committed to crediting their ancestors (purvajas and gurus) with all values and truths, wisdom and culture, that they found themselves to be in possession of at any given period of time. This trait of Indian culture, or ways of classical Indians, is one of the factors responsible for the growth of disciplines of knowledge in

the form of or along the line of direct and indirect commentators on earlier texts. The scholars of classical India preferred to write commentaries directly or indirectly on (ultimately speaking) the thoughts and words of he who founded the school to which they belonged. In their beliefs and practices they were committed to holding that all they say really belonged, as a matter of fact, to the founder of the school of thought (sampradaya) or his direct or indirect disciples of the past. What they state more elaborately, clearly and logically and the truths they establish with a sort of finality, they say, are not theirs but what the founder (and his followers who have gone before them) himself thought and really *intended* to communicate in his own way and style. They are bringing out what was in the mind or thought of the founder rather than creating new truths or generating new knowledge.

What we find even in Iksaku or Manu are, we know, not their own thoughts but what they were taught by their predecessors in their own way. The same is true about the so-called ideas of Sanatkumar or Vidura or Yudhishthir or Patanjali or Pānini. Even the Veda is aparuseya and one of the senses of apauruseya is that God does not *invent* the Veda, at the beginning of every creation, in complete independence.

I have reason to believe that Ramakrishna was consciously the bearer of this legacy. He would not have approved of our imputing to him many ideas if thereby we tended to suggest that he was the originator of those ideas. It may not be a modern way of speaking, but today often there remains hidden a modern cast of mind when we use expressions like "x's idea". Modern minds, here or elsewhere, seized as they are by a craze for individualism and originality, are too eager to credit themselves with certain ideas which legitimately belong to others.

To sum up so far, our first idea about Ramakrishna is such that we cannot describe many ideas we associate with Ramakrishna as Ramakrishna's ideas if that means he was the originator of those

ideas. This we cannot do, not just because that would be factually wrong, but also and more importantly because Ramakrishna would not have approved of our so crediting him. This is what makes him a true representative of classical Hindu culture and the embodiment of the views and values that characterize this culture.

I. v) Two other senses of the expression "x's idea"

We cannot be deemed to have finished our discussion of Part I till we take note of, if not discuss at length, two other senses of the expression of the form "x's idea" or "Ramakrishna's ideas".

Besides the senses originator and owner there is a third sense also in which we use the expression "x's idea". When we use the expression of this form we mean x is the direct source of our knowledge of the idea in question. We impute an idea to x if we got the idea from x for the first time and/or got it from him directly, in some special or even esoteric sense. In the ordinary and absolute sense the inventor of an idea is the first teacher or source of that idea. But in a relative sense the direct disciples may impute an idea to their teacher from whom they got the idea for the first time even if the teacher in question is not the inventor of the idea. The direct students who learn from their teacher for the first time that the earth moves round the sun cannot be credited with the idea nor can the idea be said to be the idea of that teacher. Copernicus or Aristarchus still remain the first to tell it to us (though indirectly). In the spiritual field it makes all the difference when a disciple directly receives from his preceptor (guru) a certain idea, truth, or value. This cannot be compared with the disciple finding it in a book or hearing it from anyone other than his guru. Reading a printed text of Upansiad is quite different from receiving, as a duly ordained disciple, from his guru the instructions in the Upanishad.

But there may be yet another sense in which some may or do describe certain ideas as Sri Ramakrishna's ideas. We will return to this sense a little later. So we have not completely answered the

question whether we are right in our claims that certain ideas we associate with Sri Ramakrishna are *his* ideas.

I. vi) Why do we make the claim we make?

We sometimes attribute certain ideas to a person in a somewhat *wrong sense* thereby unwittingly creating confusion if not deliberate untruth for some definite purpose and from a certain particular motive. So the question this time is not what is the sense of "Ramakrishna's ideas", rather it is why people are found so eager to credit Ramakrishna with some great and noble ideas? *Why* do we make the claim in question when there is the possibility of its turning out to be false? Sometimes we do this with a desire to glorify one who we believe and even know to be really great. And one way of saying and showing that a person is great is to attribute to him some noble ideas wrongly suggesting thereby, consciously or unconsciously, that he is the *originator* of the ideas in question. Thus one reason why we attribute certain ideas to a person is to build a glorified public image of the person. It is a way of convincing others that the man is great. Outside politics and particularly in the field of religion one may be confused but honest. There are a number of really great ideas which we associate with Sri Ramakrishna or attribute to him. In one sense it is a laudable weakness on our part to desire that others also accept the man as great who we so regard. And to make sure that others do not miss this point we speak of some ideas as *his ideas* and the ideas are, in such cases, invariably noble. This may not be either the complete or best answer to the question why we attribute certain ideas to a person and describe those ideas as his to suggest that he is the originator. Even when originally the motive was good and laudable it is risky. Apart from the risk of spreading factual falsehood we may begin to take pride in making some great men well known. In doing this we often indulge in behaving and talking in a patronizing way. We tend to forget the simplest of all truths that great men do not need our certificates and in the name of popularizing great men we satisfy our secret desire and common weakness of projecting our

own selves. We become too eager to project ourselves as disciples of a great man. Thus attempts at projecting a man like Ramakrishna may be doubly wrong and risky. We do wrong to Ramakrishna and we may be unknowingly trying to satisfy our own hidden desire to project ourselves through the act of projecting Ramakrishna. The case may not be much different with people who publicly and forcefully denounce great men like Sri Ramakrishna and his actions as vile. These men act, knowingly or unknowingly, to create stunt values. For, that is another way of forcing others to notice them. Publicity may be a great thing in the field of politics but in the realm of the spiritual it is a veritable disvalue.

I. vii) We too are guilty!

By agreeing to discuss "Sri Ramakrishna's ideas" in this seminar and by dissenting from (at least till the sense of the expression is fully clarified) or assenting to attributing certain ideas to him we may have exposed ourselves to the same risk or wrong doing. This is quite possible, though the risk is less here, as we are aware of the possibilities in question. The minimum that we can do under the circumstance, considering the constraints of space and time, is to tender apologies to Ramakrishna [ideally before I begin to speak about his ideas and thoughts] following the example of Bhagavan Vyāsa who appealed to God that He might pardon him for having done threefold wrong to Him by singing in His praise, presenting Him in visible form, and seeking Him in places of pilgrimage. Besides we willingly submit ourselves to the judgment of the learned.

The first wrong that one can do to Sri Ramakrishna is to attribute to him certain ideas in a way so as to suggest that Ramakrishna was the originator of these ideas. Even if the motive, hidden or explicit, is to project him as a great person before the world at large, it would be doing wrong to Ramakrishna and going against his explicit teaching. No great man can ultimately remain unknown to true seekers as flowers which have honey get invariably spotted by bees. But any

effort to tell both seekers and non-seekers that Ramakrishna was a great man, before they have themselves found out, is to forget that Ramakrishna's words and life were the expressions of the value of self-effacement. He did not need nor did he want to be known as a great man. We have no reason to believe that he would have liked or expected people to sing in his praise. He believed in living a simple and humble life – a life of self-abnegation and self-effacement – and he lived it. He himself said that he had somehow managed to retain barely an iota of ego-sense. So it is not very difficult to understand that he would not have wanted either to project himself as a great saint or be so projected by others. He was amused, and not affected in the least, when a fierce debate was going on whether he was an avatar or not. And he would not have wanted that people should indulge in the weakness of projecting his divine qualities, in the name of singing his praise, directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly. So all efforts to praise Ramakrishna, teach people his greatness, and deliver public discourses on his thoughts and actions seem to be exactly what he would not have approved of. So we cannot help apologizing to him for agreeing to speak on his ideas.[1]

By agreeing to discuss his ideas I might have doubly wronged him. He used to express his thoughts and ideas so directly and simply that he left us no scope for adding elucidations to those. So I may be wrong if I thought that I could further explain or clarify some of his ideas. Who could express or explain more simply and directly as he did? Sri Ramakrishna is justly famous for his inimitable style of teaching and talking which was marked by simplicity and directness. Our cerebral exercise in seminars and in producing increasing number of books explaining Ramakrishna's thoughts may appear to be ordinarily misconceived, unless perhaps we can find authentic controversies relating to the life and teaching of Ramakrishna.

I. viii) Could we do anything else?

Is there anything else then that we could do about his ideas? We should not even hope to explain his ideas for communicating them

more intelligibly to others. Nor can or should we claim the ideas to be Ramakrishna's with a view to projecting him as the inventor of the ideas and or thereby projecting ourselves. Then what do we do? Well, the first thing that we can do and perhaps need to do is to design experiments, so to say, in the sense of finding out ways and means of living those ideas. The ideas may be simple and easy to understand but they may not be so easy to live. But his ideas and teachings will not serve their purpose till we live them. Seminars like the present one can hardly help us much in this regard. Besides, if it is a question of living the ideas then every single individual needs to find out for himself or herself how best he or she can do that.

Another thing one may do for one's own benefit: instead of over exerting oneself to prove that Ramakrishna was the originator of the ideas that we associate with him, one should concentrate on the ideas themselves. Almost all his ideas or ideas closely resembling his were there in different places, times, and cultures. It would do immense good to us if we repeatedly remember them and reflect on them, preferably singly rather than, except in occasional cases, collectively. In course of such exercise we may not gain theoretical clarity of his ideas, but can become better human beings in the most basic moral and spiritual sense. By constantly remembering and reflecting on lives and thoughts of men like Ramakrishna, we will find the much needed encouragement and assurance to tread the spiritual path that is precariously narrow (ksurasya dhara) and risky.

Thinking or reflecting in the sense of mere intellectual exercise is not half as useful as the endeavour to live those ideas. But living them becomes more natural and easy once we make those ideas our own through repeated and regular reading or remembering and reflection. The way of focused reflection is better than mere blind acceptance. And when we reflect we need not study the entire literature of Sri Ramakrishna, not even all the ideas that are recorded as expressed by him. One or two advices, one or two thoughts, ideas or truths for regular practice and thinking could be enough. But we need to read works like *Kathamrita* and similar works, as part of a

comprehensive spiritual praxis. Above all, we need before us living examples of realized persons, direct link with whom, through an unbroken line of disciples, has not been snapped.

Committed spiritual seekers may derive some marginal benefit from seminar discussions such as the present one if these contribute to further deepening the conviction they already have. They would derive greater benefit if the discussion is in small group of like-minded people often called *istagosthi.* This is a time-tested method and in our sāstra it has been sometimes described as Tadvidyaisahasamvāda, discussion with one's guru or the person who are knowledgeable or expert in the field besides being a highly moral man.

It is time we conclude this section after discussing briefly the last sense, at least for our purpose here, of the expression "Ramakrishna's ideas". As we said before, most of the noble ideas we associate with Ramakrishna are not his ideas in the sense that he is not the originator of those ideas. However, in one important sense we can impute a certain idea to a person, if the person not only theoretically entertains the idea but also *lives* it. Ramakrishna is among those rare few individuals who actually *lived* the ideas we associate with them. And this is another and more effective form of teaching.

We now know that ideas can be *lived,* and once one does so it results in great transformation. In this sense of practicing or living them, the ideas we attribute to Ramakrishna are indeed Ramakrishna's ideas. By living them he had added great authenticity, validity, and efficacy to the concerned ideas and also proved beyond doubt that however difficult it might be, great ideals and values are realizable.

Part II

Understanding the ideas of Ramakrishna

II. i) In the first part we discussed if one could make any intelligible sense of the expression "Ramakrishna's ideas". Granting that there

is or can be some intelligible sense in which some of the ideas we associate with Ramakrishna can be called *his* ideas, the question arises what do these ideas stand for? How could or should one understand some or all of these ideas? Such questions, if legitimate, eminently justify seminars like the present one. For now the task is to understand the ideas and/or find out ways of discovering what they mean. This is a problem which is basically theoretical and intellectual. But certain conditions are to be fulfilled if any authentic critical discussion is to be possible.

There are two basic requirements. First, there should be genuine controversies regarding at least some of Ramakrishna's ideas. Such controversies would show that there are objective difficulties in understanding at least some of the ideas we associate with Ramakrishna. Understanding in such cases demand successful resolution of the controversies in question through critical examination and authentic debate or discussion. On the other hand, where issues are substantive, understanding of the sense in question is found to be very useful not only in the theoretical sense but also in the practical sense. For, the resolution of the controversy would lead to a firm conviction and belief that one of the alternative positions is true: we could then say with certainty that a particular idea is sound. Once one achieves this, one can resolutely act on it or practice it. Such practice in its turn is likely to result in the desirable transformation.

The second requirement is that we should have reason to believe that a discussion on and the resolution of the controversies in question will be useful. Thus the existence of controversy and the promise of good result through a resolution of that controversy are requirements without which no authentic theoretical discussion is possible.

II. ii) Two sources of the difficulties

Ramakrishna's ideas are famous for their simplicity. Under what

conditions can these ideas become difficult to understand? An idea becomes difficult to understand if it is controversial, and this happens if different people understand or *interpret* it in incompatible ways. As the number of works published on Ramakrishna's ideas (even if we confine ourselves only to those works where Ramakrishna's ideas are elucidated rather than critiqued) increases two things become almost inevitable. Some works will be found to repeat what is already there in other works. But what is more important is that some books will be found to offer different and incompatible elucidations of the same idea of Ramakrishna. In the second case, it will become very difficult, if not impossible, to be sure which one was Ramakrishna's idea or how he wanted us to understand it. This is nothing new. Followers of Buddha could not agree as to what Buddha actually taught or meant.

It will be premature to think that the conflict of interpretations of the sort in question vindicates the argument that interpretations are avoidable, unreliable and wasteful acts under all circumstances, and that we should firmly stick to only those works which just record objectively the words of great men like Ramakrishna. There are at least two reasons why this is premature. First, even those who agree that Ramakrishna had an inimitable style of communicating his thoughts directly, without use of tongue-twisting jargon, hold that the thoughts he expressed or taught were very profound. Without in the least doubting the qualities of Ramakrishna as a teacher or communicator, one may hold that the mismatch between the depth of the thoughts and the simplicity of the language in which they are expressed might have a misleading effect sometimes and on some persons. For every individual is not aware of the difference between familiarity and clarity. Ramakrishna's ideas or words might *appear* to be simple and clear to those who are not otherwise discerning, but for whom the words of Ramakrishna are quite familiar everyday words. Often where familiarity counts as clarity, the simplicity becomes deceptive. Because his words are familiar to them, many people are misled into thinking that they have understood Ramakrishna's

thoughts. Most of the works which interpret Ramakrishna's words are informed by some such thinking, and the thinking cannot be said to be unfounded. This, however, does not invalidate the fear that in their effort to bring out hidden nuances of meaning in Ramakrishna's sayings some interpreters run the risk of reading their own thoughts and views into Ramakrishna's words. The problem is we cannot help interpreting and nor can we be sure that we have not over-interpreted or under-interpreted Ramakrishna's words. We have to live with this problem but we must try to adopt all possible means to minimize the risk in one way or another.

There is another reason why it is difficult to understand Ramakrishna's words. Even if we studiously avoid interpreting his thoughts and hence producing conflicting interpretations of the same, we may face serious difficulty in understanding the words or ideas of Ramakrishna. We said earlier that what we know about Ramakrishna's ideas from (e_2) needs to be tested against or corroborated by the deliverances of (e_3). When we attempt to do so we realize that perhaps we misunderstood Ramakrishna or his ideas. When we take a certain single and isolated idea which we impute to Ramakrishna on the basis of (e_2), we find it to be simple and easy. But when we take the same idea jointly with some other single idea derived from the same source or from a different source we realize that they do not cohere happily. But till the whole set of ideas we ascribe to Ramakrishna (or for that matter to any individual) turns out to be consistent we cannot take any one idea of the set to be Ramakrishna's (or the concerned individual's) ideas; else we will have to consent to treating Ramakrishna as a person who is not consistent. Nor can we selectively ascribe some of these ideas to Ramakrishna. The only way left is to resort to interpretation and argue that the ideas conflict under certain interpretations or when we understand them in certain particular ways. Since without interpretation we cannot make the ideas jointly consistent and since without this we cannot legitimately claim the ideas to be the ideas of Ramakrishna, some kind of interpretation seems to be unavoidable. And since

there is no necessity or certainty that all will find every consistency-conferring interpretation equally acceptable, there will inevitably be the question of choice and conflict. In any way, understanding Ramakrishna's ideas collectively is far more difficult a job than 'understanding' some of them selectively and in an isolated way.

We, however, find the following to be the theoretically most important source of difficulty in understanding Ramakrishna's ideas. We begin with a certain isolated idea, which appears quite simple and then *develop* this idea in the sense of systematically making explicit its logical implications. Sometime in the process we note that the simple idea so developed conflict with some other related idea or ideas. In the next section we will illustrate with examples this type of difficulty in understanding Ramakrishna's ideas. But before that, we would like to return briefly to the much talked about simplicity and directness of Ramakrishna's teachings which, in its turn, renders scholarly discussion and interpretation of his ideas useless.

II. iii) More about simplicity

There are two sides of this simplicity. On the one hand, Ramakrishna lacked formal education and training in the art of theorizing or philosophizing. So he could not, even if he wished, speak in the analytical and technical language of theory. He spoke the only language he knew, the language of an un-educated villager. It should be admitted that villagers rarely speak the things that Ramakrishna spoke and their words rarely make the impact that Ramakrishna's words did. What is the mystery? The mystery is that he was a man of *experience*. He was a man of experience in two senses. First, he had direct experience of spiritual matters and truths: the experience he had was enormously rich both in its sweep and depth. Secondly, he depended on experience to settle issues, if and when the need arose, rather than resorting to logical reasoning and rational argument. Even though he would regularly and frequently use stories and anecdotes found in sāstras to illustrate his points, he would not do, what may be called sāstriya vicāra (and certainly not

utsāstriya vicāra); he would not go for the explanation or elaboration given in the sāstras. This is why we say that he was not a scholar. But he was extremely intelligent, and if he had a taste for it and the necessary training, he could have easily become a good philosopher and expound philosophical theories and explanations around his beliefs and ideas. Those who have the required knack and training for theoretical explanation or discourse would find, if they are honest, that their attempts to explaining Ramakrishna's ideas logically and analytically or critiquing them is hollow, particularly because they are not backed by experience. Such analytical presentations sometimes generate more problems than solutions. Those who feel this intensely desist from giving a rational account of Ramakrishna's ideas or philosophizing on them. Others, from some different motive, cast shadows on matters that always glowed in the bright light of Ramakrishna's words that poured out from his direct experience.

To a sincere and serious spiritual aspirant Ramakrishna's words and ideas, his beliefs and deeds, his life and teachings are bound to appear crystal clear besides being positive and encouraging. An example of a man of his experience is not easy to find, though during his time and a little before and after, India witnessed the emergence of a number of such persons. Those who approached him for experience and conviction, inspiration and encouragement were enthralled by his rich repertoire of illustrative stories and examples which directly spoke to their heart dispelling all doubt and disbelief. But those who have agendas like convincing reflective people of the truth, depth, significance, meaning and what not of Sri Ramakrishna's views and ideas, seek to present them in a different language – a language that speaks to the head of the audiences and not their heart. Things then become tentative, forced, and doubtful.

Part III

A Few ideas of Ramakrishna

III. i) Since within a limited time frame we can discuss only a few

of Ramakrishna's ideas, the problem of selection arises. If we think carefully we will realize that the problem of selection will arise otherwise also. Even if we decide to discuss Ramakrishna's ideas comprehensively we need to make a selection, though in a slightly different sense and for a somewhat different purpose. If a discussion of all or almost all of Ramakrishna's ideas is not to be an unplanned collection or listing of the ideas but an organized presentation of the same, then we need to decide on a few ideas which would be considered the central ideas of Ramakrishna. It is in terms of some such ideas that we form our idea of who the man is. Once by this criterion we select or identify a few core ideas then we know how to organize the totality of Ramakrishna's ideas around these core ideas. All ideas must not only be consistent with the core ideas but clarify them in the sense of deepening our understanding of them. To the extent they contribute to enriching the understanding of core ideas, other ideas gain in value and authenticity.

We will primarily identify three core ideas of which we propose to discuss very briefly only two. The first of these ideas is widely familiar. The idea is that there are as many paths to reach God as there are religious seekers. Ramakrishna expressed this idea in his famous pronouncement *"Yata mat tata path"*. The second idea seems to be far less familiar; many people do not notice it or try to understand it. The idea relates to the question who is a really great man in the field of religion. Ramakrishna held that such people are like a hole in a wall. The third idea we have in mind, the idea which Ramakrishna once expressed to Sri M., is that God is not bound by scientific laws. God willing, even such laws may be violated. Of these three ideas, the first one is most talked about. But I did not find much discussion on the other two; they are referred to rarely. These three ideas satisfy our criterion of core idea. They shed much light on the sort of person Ramakrishna was. Further, these ideas in their turn entail some important aspects of Ramakrishna's life and conduct.

Ramakrishna somewhere compared great men with a hole in

a wall. This is one of the most important ideas expressed in the uniquely simple way that was characteristic of Ramakrishna. Very few ideas give us a better or deeper insight into the man Ramakrishna was. Majority of Ramakrishna's admirers put a lie to this idea, if not so much in what they say, at least in what they do. On the other hand, those who do not belong to the group of admirers often fail to notice how truly this idea gives us the essence of Ramakrishna.

The difference between a wall and a hole in a wall is quite easy to understand. While a wall does not allow us to see beyond, a hole does. A wall is an opaque barrier, and an obstacle to our vision; it restricts rather than widens our vision. The wall is a metaphor for man's ego. The ego predisposes him to projecting his own self and seeking other's attention or forcing other's attention towards him alone. He talks about himself and glorifies himself, and as a part of it, demeans others, including those who are genuinely good and great. A man with such a dominant ego blinds our vision or narrows it down. He does not and perhaps cannot allow us to see beyond him and see the reality and truth beyond him. In the realm of religion, self-styled great men with their inflated ego block our vision and stand as an opaque screen between us and God. They would rather like to be treated as god rather than enable us to see God beyond them.

A truly great man, particularly in the realm of religion and spirituality, is one who has got rid of his ego. He stands before us as a transparent medium. He completely effaces his ego and is so transparent that when we meet him we do not even see or notice him, but only see all he stands for. We do not see him but see through him the God who is beyond him and for who he stands. We see the good and God through him, truth and beauty through him. He is always present before us, but he speaks and behaves in such a way that men do not *notice* him. The great man's life is a life of self-effacement and self-abnegation. Sri M.'s later life was such a life. Those who would visit him would realize on return that they

had seen and heard, beyond M., only M.'s guru. M. could do this because he had succeeded in self-effacement. M.'s guru Ramakrishna himself did this. He would always direct our vision away from him and to God. A hole in a wall not only allows us to see beyond but also enables us to do so by lending to our vision direction and focus.

Many of Ramakrishna's admirers, who are no match for the egoless M., put a lie to Ramakrishna's idea of great men being like a hole in a wall. A great man is one who himself remains almost invisible and through whom we know and who directs our vision to, a greater culture, a greater dharma, and a greater deity. But Ramakrishna's admirers project such a man who never liked to project himself at all. And they project him so much and in such a manner that there remains nothing else to see or know. The emotional and unthinking devotion of some over-zealous men make them project a great man in such a way that does not allow him to be effective in the way he is most naturally effective and the way he could be and wanted to be effective. Through such projection and propagation of his ideas, we may found a club or an organization and secure a large following and an important position for us in them, but the great man is only made to look smaller. He is not projected as great where he is actually great. We make him, in our projection, God himself, and thereby prevent him from being a hole to see God beyond him.

III. ii) Implications of the idea of a great man

Ramakrishna is indeed one among the greatest of the worthy bearers of the legacy of classical Hindu dharma and culture. He is also one of the rare few who constantly remained immersed in God-consciousness and who completely surrendered themselves to God. He was hardly left with any will of his own, except perhaps the will to experience the joy of constantly thinking about God. Some fail to find how such a man could be (normally) so indifferent to issues like social injustice (which he would rarely speak about) or need for social service (he will hardly ask his disciples or admirers

to practice social service). About Aurobindo and Krishnaprem also the question was asked how they could remain indifferent to the infamous Bengal massacre preceding India's independence. Similarly, many fail to understand Ramakrishna's working out the financial future of his wife when he would be no more. These questions are nothing new, and we do not suggest that they do not create problems in understanding Ramakrishna or that there are no ways of solving these problems.

We, however, have noticed that attempts are sometimes made to project Ramakrishna as a socio-religious reformer. This may be born out of an urge on the part of his admirers to see or project him as an avatar. Disciples of Pranabananda have also called the latter a Yugavatara, and he indeed was deeply and overtly concerned with many social evils, some of which he and his disciples fought with great success. But we fail to understand how Ramakrishna could be viewed as a reformer. One of the implications of acknowledging him as a man of God consciousness is to rule out the possibility of his being a social reformer or advising his disciples to undertake social service. When we project great men like Nanak, Kabir, Ramakrishna and the like as great reformers, we do so out of a fundamental ignorance. A great man in the field of religion or spirituality cannot find fault in anything or with any person. They are adoşadarshī. This is where he is different from a reformer. So when we take pride in projecting such great men as reformers we demean them rather than glorify them.

So if we care to draw the implications of the idea that great men are like a hole in a wall and that Ramakrishna was a great man in this sense, then we cannot ascribe to him ideas and actions appropriate to a reformer. This is just an example how implications are needed to be drawn from the core ideas that we ascribe to a man like Ramakrishna, and how such implications facilitate our attributing or not attributing, as the case may be, certain other ideas to him. Besides, when instead of respecting and valuing the self-effacement

of these great men we go on to project them as so and so, it appears like we are issuing them accolades which they never cared for or needed. If we forget this fact we would fail to understand these great men and their ideas correctly.

The second idea to discuss is that there are as many paths (leading to God) as there are (religious) faiths. This idea is not only viewed and described as one of the most important of Ramakrishna's ideas but is also believed to be of greatest relevance today. Many find in it the proof of the fact that Ramakrishna had clearly conceived or entertained the idea of a universal religion (or at least harmony of religions). We have said earlier that the idea of universal religion is not new. Before Ramakrishna many people entertained similar ideas. It may be said, with some qualification, that while others before him have only entertained the idea, Ramakrishna practiced it. What we are now interested in is the evidence that some people offer as a proof that Ramakrishna practiced universal religion. They argue that Ramakrishna spent some time just as a Muslim or a Christian and sought God in different ways. Brojendra Nath Seal once wrote "He [Ramakrishna] sought to experience each religion in its entirety in sādhanā or spiritual discipline." "Now he would be a Moslem *fakir* with appropriate rituals, attitudes and garb, and now a Christian neophyte, stricken with a sense of sin and crying for salvation. There was nothing of mere pose or mere imagination in all this." We agree.

First we need to be definite and clear as to the meaning of the saying "Yata mat tata path". Obviously, by the expression "mat" is understood religious mat or religious faith. Accordingly it amounts to saying that there are as many paths in the realm of religion as there are faiths. One meaning and implication is that all religions are the same; there is nothing to choose between them. This may have great emotional appeal but how much theoretical content or justification does it have? Is it a priori true that any two religions are the same – that, in principle, it is impossible to distinguish two different systems of religion? Or is it meant that whatever differences

may be there between two religious systems the difference is not religiously important? One thing is certain, nobody, particularly people of a different faith, believes us when we say this. They may take us to be politically correct but they do not take us (the case may be different with Ramakrishna) to be honest and truthful. In other words, people who in practice takes his Guru or his religion to be the best, says that all religions are the same. Anyway, our point is slightly different. What is the convincing argument for believing in the position that no two religions are different or the difference between them, if any, are unimportant at least from the religious point of view? We can make the content of the assertion too thin to be contradictable. Once we abstract from all the concrete details of a religious system, as is often done by branding almost all its beliefs as *superstition* and all its practice as senseless *ritual,* we can hardly find any difference between any two religions. But even when we have made the idea of a religion (religious system) sufficiently thin to ensure amity between different religious groups one difference remains. We, the practitioners of religions, are born into (and have not chosen to be so born) different religions. Accepting this truth, great men like Balananda Brahmacari and Leo Tolstoy, to name just two, have given good clarification to the idea of unity of religions. In their account, it is at least pragmatically justified for a person to practice the religion in which he is born into, even if there is no essential difference between this religion and any other religion. But how can this be acceptable to proselytizing religions? A faith in the superiority of one religion over other religions is a built-in-doctrine in these systems. We cannot wish this away. If we draw the implication from the idea of universal religion or harmony of religions or of sayings like "Yata mat tata path" that proselytizing or missionary activity is no essential part of a religion, then it is extremely doubtful how many will buy our idea of religious unity. We would like to conclude this part of the discussion by noting that Tolstoy had given a very beautiful expression to the idea of the essential unity of religion and he has made the unity more substantive

by making it consist in the *seeking* of god.[2]

There are as many ways of approaching or seeking God as there are religious faiths. In respect of seeking God there is no difference between any two religions (we ignore for the present the view of those who want to have religion without god). Seeking god is a religious universal. This is the heart of religion and religious life. In this sense all religions are essentially the same. Compared to this essential feature, rituals, beliefs, and practices which differ from religion to religion are unimportant. God can be approached and reached by taking to different paths. But there are many more things to discuss about the intricate issue of universal religion. We skip them here as we have discussed it elsewhere.

Part IV

Impact of Ramakrishna's ideas today

It is now time to turn briefly to the question of the impact of Ramakrishna's ideas on us today. Many people speak in a way which shows that they are self-complacent. But there are others who think that the impact is minimal to nil. Their argument is that for about one hundred and fifty years devotees of Ramakrishna have been propagating his thoughts systematically and sincerely but there is no noticeable improvement in the local or global society which is expected from or is claimed to have resulted from these ideas. It is no good resorting to subjunctive conditionals and say that had it not been for Ramakrishna's and Vivekananda's ideas the situation could have been worse. The weakness of such assertions is that they can neither be proved nor disproved. Quantity wise there is great improvement in the number of devotees of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda; the number has enormously increased. Similar increase is noticed in the number of people who are acquainted with the ideas of these men. But neither in their personal life nor, through that, in our social life there is any great and durable transformation

in the expected direction. This need not be due to the weakness of the ideas themselves which have been there from long antiquity and which Ramakrishna lived and thereby demonstrated to be both realizable and effective. The fact is that we just read or hear their ideas and reiterate those but do not seriously or regularly practice them. Transformation does not come from belief alone. Resolute practice is necessary. We have turned some living truths to dead rituals and the only ritual we observe is the ritual of utterance, of reiterating great sayings of great men. This is the easier way of showing our respect for great men. Every other day pictures are published in the newspapers of leaders in the company of official devotees of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda; they always speak in glowing terms of these great men. But Indian society or global society is hardly any the better than it was before. Just as we speak in high terms about men like Kabir, Nanak, Ramakrishna, Aurobindo etc. etc. so also we go on untiringly criticizing Ramchandra and Dhritarastra, Yudhisthir, Krishna and who not. Our praise as well as criticism remains just empty talk. Society continues to languish as it did for many centuries now. Our further misfortune is that men like Aurobindo, Gopinath Kaviraj, Vivekananda could not accomplish, as Kane said in another context, their projected task of changing the local or global society. It is for us to find out whether we failed to make the dream of these men come true or whether there was some weakness in the way they conceived the task of transforming the society. One thing seems to be common to all the three great personalities. They did not encourage us to think that we through our individual effort would be able to do much. Ramakrishna at least was much more realistic; he did not talk much about our transforming the society through taking up the responsibility of educating (lecturing) people and serving them (doing social service to them). He emphasized on our resolute practice as a means of changing and transforming ourselves. Instead today we think and talk too big perhaps to avoid doing even the little we could actually do. I would like to end by quoting a portion of what Leo Tolstoy said while he was reading Ramakrishna and

Vivekananda, not because I accept it as the whole truth but because it asserts in a way that we are to own up the responsibility. "One thing is and one thing is beyond doubt: *my life and my* possibility and necessity to decide how to spend it. This alone, this alone is the basis of all religions, of all philosophies. And this alone is there." To return to where we began, the meaning of Ramakrishna's idea, the other meaning of "x's idea", is that x *lives* the idea. Ramakrishna's ideas are Ramakrishna's in this most important sense that he lived those ideas most authentically.

Notes

1 This reminds us of the clash of opinions between Krishnaprem and Dilip Roy. It is difficult to say the Dilip Roy did not have something to say in his support. But equally true that Krishnaprem gave more authentic expression of the attitude of great men in the field of religion and spirituality.

2 For a number of useful things Tolstoy had to say in connection with his incomplete and indirect encounter with the thoughts of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda I would like to refer the readers to the quotations in the article "Leo Tolstoy Reads Sri Ramakrishna" by Serge Serebriany.

Why Pray to God who can Hear the Ant's Anklets? Prayer, Freedom and Karma

Arindam Chakrabarti

"I never saw a cow steal. An oyster never told a lie. Yet they are not greater than man. This life is a tremendous assertion of freedom.... Man has freedom already, but he will have to discover it. He has it, but every moment forgets it."

– Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, Vol. V, pp. 287-88

"As long as you are in the network of time, space and causation, to say you are free is nonsense, because, in that network all is under rigorous law, sequence and consequence. Every thought you think is caused, every feeling has been caused. To say that the will is free is sheer nonsense.... Will is caught in the network of Māyā, and therefore "free will" is a misnomer. It means nothing – sheer nonsense. So is all this talk about freedom."

– Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 14

ONE

Sri Ramakrishna mocked philosophical wrangling in sharp – and unwittingly Freudian – language as "Phallozofy" (*Kathamrita*, 1884, June 30). But he was keenly interested in listening to a philosophical debate, for example, between Narendra and Girish, or between the publicly skeptical but secretly spiritual scientist Dr. Mahendralal Sarkar and others. One of the issues that were discussed often in his presence was the question of efficacy of prayer to God. Sri Ramakrishna's own stance on this is hard to pin down. But it is clear that he was constantly engaging in some kind of conversation

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with Mother Kali who, according to him, is identical with Supreme Brahman. Whether all of these conversations with Kali-Brahman (this concept of "Kali-Brahman" is allusive of those deep lyrics of one of Sri Ramakrishna's most favorite songs: "Kali Brahma, jene marma") can count as our concept of prayer. All prayer need not be petitionary prayer. Conversation with God is a standard form of prayer in ancient and medieval Christianity. Even when Sri Ramakrishna would engage in petitionary prayer, he would pray for highly abstract lofty things such as pure love of God, pure wisdom, self-knowledge, complete detachment from worldly objects, as well as for simple concrete mundane things like relief from the pain of a fractured arm. Sometimes he would even promise to reward the Goddess with a coconut and sugar if she would fulfill his wish. What he could not bear was hypocrisy, ostentatious show of devotion or ritualistic pompousness. In the context of discussing the "uselessness" of loud prayers again (even though he encouraged and engaged in loud, collective, musical chanting of God's name, with percussion instruments, a form of prayer which he referred to as Nāradiya Bhakti, apt for the fallen age of Kali), Sri Ramakrishna once made the most extra-ordinarily poetic remark:

"Why do you beg from God so loudly and publicly? ***Don't you know He can hear even the ant's anklets*** ("tini je pniprer pāyer nuupur shunte pān"....).[1] Not only is God omniscient hence yelling to let him know your needs is ridiculous. God's foreknowledge of what is going to happen to us makes our effort to change our futures with free will redundant. Strictly speaking, nothing, including the prayers of his beloved creatures, should make any difference to God's decisions and dispensations, simply because nothing makes any difference to a time-less Supreme Being. Yet, the God of love, however beyond all differences, cannot be indifferent to our suffering and supplication. Thus a philosophical conundrum brews in this area. **So, was Sri Ramakrishna a determinist?**

It is this question that I shall explore in this paper, mainly with the help of the arguments presented by his greatest and best-certified interpreter Swami Vivekananda.

TWO

Swami Vivekananda is and deserves to be remembered as the philosopher who gave a modern and interculturally audible voice of freedom to Vedanta and Hinduism. He appealed to the colonized Hindus to assert their spiritual freedom in the moral, practical and political planes of existence. There could not have been a clearer voice in support of freedom of the human will. Yet in one of his historic 1896 lectures delivered in New York[2] Swami Vivekananda asserts with characteristic boldness and directness that the expression "Free-Will" is a misnomer: "to say that the will is free is sheer nonsense."[3]

A quick argument follows. All willing happens within the causal nexus of Māyā. Nothing within the realm of Māyā is really free. Hence no willing can be free. Even our false feeling that we are free to choose is itself unchosen. It is part of the illusion-generating power of Māyā that we are bound to feel as if we are the real doers when we are not. "Therefore we see at once that there cannot be any such thing as free will; the very words are a contradiction, because will is what we know is within our universe and everything within our universe is moulded by the conditions of space time and causation. ... that which obeys the law of causation cannot be free."[4]

Elsewhere Vivekananda gives a Kantian kind of argument for empirical determinism. Willing as an effect of belief and desire and a cause of acting takes place within the phenomenal world conditioned by the laws of space-time and causation. Whatever is brought under the laws of cause and effect is deterministic hence unfree. With this collapsing of *Karma* with law-governed causation

somewhat strangely he mixes Hume's doctrine of association of ideas, ending up with the view that laws, after all, are mind-made. It is our empirically conditioned expectation of regular succession of similar events that projects causal laws on nature: "Really speaking, therefore, law does not exist in nature." As if this much complication was not enough: Vivekananda goes on to ascribe this *anti-realistic* view of causality to the Nyāya school of Indian philosophy – a school notorious for its *realism* and its staunch adherence to the doctrine that causal connections are mind-independently there in nature.

Thus we have at least three highly contentious claims juxtaposed here: First, that the *moral* retributive law of Karma is but a version of *natural* causation. Second, that this causal law is superimposed on reality by the human mind due to its habit of expecting similar patterns of succession on the basis of past experience. And third, that the Nyāya concept of *Vyāpti* (which Vivekananda mentions explicitly) is nothing but the psychological law of association of ideas!

I don't want to comment in detail on the first claim: that virtuous acts bring about happiness or that all painful experience must be due to past acts which are morally reprehensible – seems quite obviously *not* an instance of straight physical causal law, simply because one end of the causal link involves the non-natural value-terms "good" and "bad". Even if one treats "virtuous" as an adjective on a par with "yellow" (*Contra*, G. E. Moore) as indeed Nyāya would, because colours and dharma/adharma both occur in the list of particular qualities – the interaction between virtue and happiness can hardly be claimed to be like that between fire and smoke – it is not *experienced* or *drista* like the latter. And that renders the second claim dubious too! The third claim could be tenuously defended on the basis of the Nyāya refusal to accommodate causal *power* or

capacity (sakti) admitted by Mimāmsā as a separate category of reality. But it seems incorrect to impute the Humean view of causality on out and out objectivist Nyāya philosophy: God is the supernatural *cause* of fructification of an individual's 'traces' of past actions, good and bad, according to Udayana's first argument for the existence of God. Surely, that is not so because our *idea* of God is psychologically invariably associated with our *idea* of past Karma! Most of us hardly have any clear empirical *idea* of any past Karma – independently of the scriptural law of Karma!

Perhaps Vivekananda would have little regard for such scholarly accuracy. But such a subjective view of causal necessity seems to clash with his own other tenet that the will's freedom itself is a subjective illusion. In the final analysis, it seems that according to Vivekananda, the human mind is at the same time responsible for superimposing law-governedness on every event including one's own mental acts of will, as well as, for creating the illusion of liberty. But how can liberty and necessity *both* be illusory?

Perhaps this tension can be resolved and we shall return to a kind of resolution at the end of this paper. But, on the face of it, Vivekananda's determinism at the phenomenal plane does not sit well at all with his activist philosophy of Practical Vedanta. A *practical* Vedantin cannot coherently appeal to the *vyavahārika/pāramārthika* distinction. He issues the fiery call to arise, awake, and not to stop till the goal is reached. What is the point of such admonition if we are chained by our beginningless ignorance within a strictly deterministic world?

A similar air of paradox can be traced back to *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* – the fountainhead of nearly all the central doctrines of Vivekananda. Ramakrishna urges his devotees to make constant spiritual *effort*; yet he says that the human individual is never really the "doer" (kartā), he is a mere "instrument".

The clearest example, of course, of such simultaneous insistence on predestination and personal volition is to be found in the Bhagavadgita. At the end of his oddly timed philosophical discourse Krishna says: "Get up, defeat your foes and attain fame" and adds "These enemies have all been killed by me well in advance!" (One wishes to exclaim "Hari! Hari! Quite contrary!")

THREE

The source of this tension lies in the very heart of the philosophical debate between freedom and determinism.

Five different types of arguments can be given in support of the thesis that human action is **never free** action. The first is an easy metaphysical argument:

A) Every human action is an event in time.
Every event in time has a cause.
Whatever has a cause is determined by a strict causal law – whether or not we are able in each case to discern what that law is.
Whatever is determined by a strict causal law is non-free, since given its antecedent it could not have happened otherwise.
Therefore every human action is non-free or no human action is free.

B) The second is a *logico-semantic argument*, whose force is not so easy to feel. It is beautifully summarized in the following **sloka** from that goldmine of ethical wisdom called ***Pañcatañtra***:

"Yad a-bhāvi na tad bhāvi, yad bhāvi na tad anyathā.
Iti cintā-visaghno'yam agadah kim na pīyate ?"

"What is not-going-to-happen will not happen, what is going to happen cannot be otherwise. Why not drink this potion that kills the poison of anxiety?" (Note that ***Pañcatañtra*** calls this a lazy man's

philosophy "**iti keşāncit ālasyavacanam**")

So, the argument goes like this:

Any action that we appear to be deciding now whether to do or not to do is a future event.

Like an event in the past about which it is either determinately true or determinately false that it happened, an event in the future – independently of our ability to predict or foresee – is either going to take place or not going to take place, since a future-tense sentence is either true or false (now).

If it is *going to happen* – i.e. if the sentence "Romney will become the President" is *true* then no one, including Romney himself, can do anything to make that statement false.

If it is not going to happen, i.e. if that statement is *false*, then no one – not even Obama – can make it true by changing its truth value.

Since in neither case does anyone have any freedom to change the undiscovered truth-value of the future tense sentence – and a third option does not exist – no one is free about any future action – which is all that one feels free about.

C) The third is a religious or theistic argument – though it can be given in terms of any non-divine omniscient person like the **Buddha** or **Mahavira** as well.

Had I been really free in choosing my future course of action then no one – not even God can *know* from now what I am going to choose, freely, to do.

But God is omniscient. **S/he** knows all that was, is or will be the case.

So it is not true that no one knows what I shall choose to do.

Therefore I am not really free.

Instead of omniscience, the omnipotence of God is also used sometimes to deduce that we are merely instruments – mechanical dolls – ***yantrārudhāni māyayā*** in the hands of the only real "doer" which is God.

D) The fourth is also a religious argument, though it is not theistic. Even atheistic Hindu and Buddhist and Jaina philosophers can propose this argument for determinism, as long as they share religious faith in the ethico-hedonic law of karmic retribution. It goes as follows:

Whatever happens in the bodily or mental life of a human being is wholly determined by his or her past Karma – good and bad actions done in this or an earlier life that have left their unseen effects behind. Even if no external force compels me to act the way I actually do, my so called "own" will to act is an unchosen effect of my own past actions and their unseen but accumulating effects on my disposition.

If the will itself is an unchosen effect of an inexorable law – then whatever is propelled by such unchosen unfree will is itself unfree. Hence none of my actions, even the ones that I feel I have voluntarily done of my own accord, are free.

E) Finally, the fifth argument is a secular version of the Karma-theoretic argument in terms of psychological determinism.

A voluntary action is an action *caused* by my volition.

My act of volition – whether it is identified with a neurophysical event in the brain or not – is a mental *event* as much applicable in terms of its antecedents and lawlike connections – as any physical event. Just as a kleptomaniac or a neurotic obsessive person does not act freely – I also undergo psychological states propelled by my own neuroses and external stimuli. What I happen to think or wish or elect or decide is in principle explicable in terms of my

genetic code and the details of my upbringing and my immediate environmental inputs.

Therefore none of my voluntary actions are genuinely free.

With such a battery of supportive arguments, **determinism** looks invincible and **freedom** does not seem to have any chance at all!

But none of the above arguments have gone unchallenged. Take, for example, the very general first argument. Even if we grant that as an event, every human action must have a cause – that cause need not be another *event*. The cause of my own action can be my own self – the very person that I am. In order to be a *free* action my action need not be *uncaused*. As long as it is *auto*-nomous – caused by my self – and not caused by another foreign agency it can be free. And the causal chain of events can stop at the self. Since the self is not an event but a substance – its being itself free from the sway of causal law is quite consistent with the general law: every *event* must have a cause.

In response to the religious or theistic argument from God's foreknowledge, theologians have defended human freedom in the face of that argument rather easily. If you do not already assume determinism – then there is no reason to admit that before I actually decide to raise my left hand next Sunday morning or not – there is any truth-value – either *true* or *false* to the forecast: "Arindam will raise his left hand next Sunday morning." And if there is no truth-value to it, it does not tarnish or curtail God's omniscience not to know which truth-value it has. So, in brief, God does not know the exact course of my future free actions because – as yet – there *is* no course of actions by me to be known.

Another alternative route one can take to dissolve the tension between God's foreknowledge and our genuine freedom – is to say that God being *timeless* – the question: Does he know *now* what I

shall do *next* Sunday – does not arise for him, because the question is inextricably temporal.

But instead of spending time in a detailed dismantling of the pro-determinist arguments given above – let me come right away to three very strong arguments in favour of the opposite view, called *libertarianism* – the view that human actions – at least some of them – are indeed free, and free will is a real **feature** of man rather than "sheer nonsense" – as Swamiji says.

The first argument is from introspective self-observation.

a) When we notice the workings of our own minds we undeniably observe and feel that while some mental states and acts we simply cannot help, upon others we have an obvious control. If I feel, for some reason very angry with a friend, the desire to use wounding words seems to flow uncontrollably from that anger. But when I decide to imagine a nice scenario in my mind's eye, as it were, I seem to have a good deal of creative freedom as to which scenario to imagine – a beautiful temple on a hill-top or a beach with palm trees or a village of thatched cottages in the middle of lush green paddy fields – or a gushing Ganga coming out of snowcapped Himalaya – and as a *poet* one feels an unrestrained sovereign – in the realm of imagination.

About the nature of our own mental states – whether it is pain I am suffering or pleasure – whether the anger is mild or intense – my own considered introspective evidence seems to be such an infallible and irreplaceable evidence – that if I feel I am free with respect to some mental acts – I must actually be free. Therefore some mental acts are free. Indeed, to use the standard argument from contrast, we would not know what it is to be compelled, constrained, forced to think, feel or perceive, some of the time, unless at other times we were genuinely uncompelled, unconstrained and unforced.

b) If for some reason the above appeal to direct introspective evidence is disregarded as illusory or misplaced – the strongest argument for preserving the freedom of human actions comes from the need for ethical appraisal.

If all that human beings do is naturally causally determined then all our moral reactive attitudes of resenting, regretting, reprehending, admiring, rewarding, punishing etc. – this entire range of ethical appraisals would be as illicit as blaming a cow for stealing or an oyster for lying.

But the undeniably unique feature of humans is that only humans can be legitimately blamed for lying or admired for sacrificing their self-interest for the benefit of others.

Since ethical appraisal and reactive attitudes cannot be altogether given up – and human society is made possible through the deployment of moral concepts and codes – free actions – the very presupposition of morality must be given proper ontological status. The only way we could ignore this argument is to insist that all morality, moral resentment and morally tinged notions like obligation, right, stealing and lying are based on a huge mistake. But, like all Error-theories, to call some widespread practice a mistake – is itself a strong moral, or at any rate, normative statement – which comes with recommendations that we *should* stop judging people's actions morally, but it makes sense to insist that we should do something only when we are *free* to do it!

c) This brings me to the most subtle argument for the ineliminability of human freedom, the argument from pragmatic self-refutation. Suppose someone gives an eloquent speech arguing that language does not exist, we would naturally conclude that such an argument refutes itself in so far as one uses language to show that language does not exist. Similarly, imagine someone arguing for the

unreality of time, concluding with the utterance: "On the above grounds, *after* you have considered my reasoning, you must stop believing in the reality of time." Since the recommendation itself assumes the temporal succession or sequence: "*after* considering my reasoning, do this" – the appeal to the unreality of time is pragmatically self-refuting.

Now, any argument that the determinist gives urging us to give up the mistaken idea of freedom – in so far as they use logical arguments at all – comes with a normative force: "If you admit the truth of the premises then you *must* acknowledge the truth of the conclusion." Now this "must" of rational logical obligation, just like the moral "must" – presupposes that the audience – the listener to whom the determinist's ***parārthānumāna*** is addressed – has the *freedom* to deny the conclusion, and hence the ability to accept the conclusion, freely and voluntarily. Thus to give any argument sincerely is to appeal to human intellectual freedom, since there is no logical "should" without a logical "can" – backed up by a logical "might not."

FOUR

For philosophers who feel the pull of both sides of this issue equally strongly – the most popular option is to adopt a middle ground called: *compatibilism*. In its purest form compatibilism rejects the very idea that causal determinism is opposed to human freedom – it insists that far from being mutually contradictory, human liberty – the capacity to act according to one's own will – and the universal sway of causal law – are mutually complementary. The one cannot prevail without the other. Freedom requires determinism.

I had remarked at the very outset that any randomness, indeterminacy or chaos does not amount to freedom. Suppose in a small part of my body the causal **nerve-functional mechanism** called

a *reflex arc* stops operating. A signal from my thalamus or my central nervous system *fails* to move a finger or a toe *regularly*. Because there is no causal control – it sometimes moves the finger, sometimes does not and sometimes whimsically the same nerve impulse moves the lower lip or the left shoulder! Now surely this does not ensure that the organism is acting "freely". Not only that – such an organism – or such a human being cannot do as it pleases. I have seen this failure of freedom tragically happen to an advanced patient of Parkinson's disease: he wants to open his mouth to talk or swallow medicine, but since his causal links between muscular effort and muscular movement have stopped functioning – and there is total randomness or lawlessness – when he tries to open his mouth – to his own utter dismay and distress – instead, his foot or hand moves about. Such visceral *anarchy* is not visceral *liberation*, it is indeed the worst form of slavery to the body. We can perform voluntary actions responsibly and creatively only because the general psychophysical causal chain (described in the **Mahabharata** 12.206.6) cognition – > desire – > will to do – > effort – >action **keeps working.**

Thus a compatibilist insists that we need the smooth functioning of causal laws in the empirical and material world for our mental and voluntary acts to be free, because free – **svatantra** – does not mean unruled, it simply means *self-ruled* – **sva-tantra**, not **para-tantra**, *other*-ruled, just as **svarāja or svarājya** does nor mean **nairājya or arājakatā.**

There are many other ways of being a compatibilist depending on how one interprets the crucial phrase: "could have done otherwise," but I don't want to conclude this lecture by occupying this rather predictable position of a reconciliator.

I wish to close this presentation by sharing with you a highly speculative idea that I have been working on rather recently. This is the idea of trying to understand the **phenomenology** of the simple

logical operator "OR" (***athavā*, simply "va"**) which is needed to express the relationship of *alternation*.

Now, two types of mental frames employ the concept of alternatives: one is an unpleasant state called doubt or uncertainty, the other is a pleasant state called the feeling of freedom or choice. The vacillating doubting mind uses "OR" when it says "Is that a man *OR* a tree-trunk in front of me out there?", "Is the many-worlds interpretation of quantum phenomena correct or the Copenhagen interpretation of those phenomena correct?" "Is the cat in Schrödinger's box dead or alive when no one has as yet looked?" The choosing, electing, unconstrained agent – **svatantrah kartā** also uses "OR" when she says "I can either wear a silk saree today or a cotton salwar kameez." "I can either eat at home or eat in a restaurant or starve."

Let me propose two kinds of argument – for my hunch is that these two uses of "OR" or alternation are not wholly unconnected.

First, a mundane, phenomenological argument: Suppose you are trying to order food from a restaurant *menu* which offers you the most wonderfully wide range of choices. The fact that the menu is not fixed and whatever you eat will be of your own election makes you feel empowered and happy. But after a while when like Buridan's ass you feel tormented and torn between equally attractive alternatives which for whatever reason you could not combine together – the process of choosing turns into a mild form of masochism – you feel unsure. Indeed the feeling of uncertainty coalesces into one simple feeling. If someone now tells you – like Krishna does in the Gita – here is what you are going to eat – I have already decided that – you will feel relieved and bullied at the same time – relieved of your painful doubt about the future and the ideal food – but bullied because the gastronomic dictator has stripped you of your right to choose.

Secondly, a linguistic argument:

The same Sanskrit word ***vimarsa*** is used in two **philosophical** schools of Indian thought, Nyāya and **Kāshmir Shaivism** respectively, to mean *doubting* and the *capacity to act freely*. What is common between these two states, the first taken to be cognitively debilitating and the second to be morally and aesthetically empowering, is the imaginative entertainment of two or more **options**. The non-technical use of the prefixed verb "vi-mṛś" signifies reflecting. And Abhinavagupta explicitly addresses the meaning of "or" in the context of connecting the ideas of "options" (*vikalpa* or *koti*) with the idea of freedom of the self to play with alternative possibilities in thinking, imagining or willing, as well as doubting. In the history of human thought, Descartes was not the first to find the self's consciousness and existence implicated in the self's capacity to doubt.

FIVE

Ramakrishna was keenly aware that freedom of the will was a bone of contention in Western Philosophy and Theology. A lot of *Christian theological* debates trickled down to him through the colonial education received by his mixed group of associates like Girish Ghosh, the playwright, Mahendralal Sarkar, the skeptical physician, and the polemical Narendranath who was to become Vivekananda. So we find him often raising or responding to the question: Do individuals have freedom to act as they wish or are they just puppets in the hands of God? And his answer was unambiguous:

"Those who have realized God are aware that free will is a mere appearance. In reality man is the machine and God its Operator, man is the carriage and God its Driver."[5]

To a rationalizing intellect such a view leads to a series of questions: Is this determinism? What sort of God is being talked about here – a

theistic or a pantheistic one? Can a pantheist's God be a "driver?" How is this position consistent with Ramakrishna's strong moral demands on the human will? Let me try to answer some of these questions.

First of all, there is no doubt that Ramakrishna was a determinist as far as actions performed by ordinary unliberated persons are concerned. He recalled with relish a statement made by some Sikh devotees that not even a single leaf in a tree flutters without God's will. So nothing is random or chosen by human deliberation. This is not just his lip-service to the Karma-doctrine – to which of course Ramakrishna would explicitly appeal from time to time. (His wife Sarada Devi explains Ramakrishna's cancer by appealing to the inexorable law of Karma; but she adds that the intensity of the Karmic retribution can be mitigated by meditation and austerities.) The traditional Hindu doctrine of Karma, however, does not assume hard determinism.[6] According to classical *Yoga* only what species (or family?) one is *born* in, the length of life and the general hedonic quality of life (jāti, āyus, and bhoga) are supposed to be determined by Karma. The rest is left to human effort, deliberation and environment. There is a lot of elbow-room for free will within such a theory of pre-destination. Indeed, the Hindu theodicy curtails even God's power to control our destinies by the fruits of human good and bad actions. Of course, God as the maintainer of cosmic harmony presides over adrista – the latent traces left behind by our past good or bad acts. Without God's conscious monitoring the Karmic potentialities are not only *unseen* (adrista) but also *unseeing* or blind. That is why Udayana's major proof for the existence of God in his *Nyāya Kusumānjali* (flower-offerings of arguments) proceeds from the need to have a driver of destiny.

Thus determination by Karma is consistent with determination by God's will. We cannot bring the charge of inequality or cruelty

against God from the presence of natural and moral evil and from the unfair distribution of happiness among his creatures because – as goes the famous *Brahma Sutra* (II.1.34) – his hands are tied by the individual's own actions. Just as being limited by logical laws is no real constraint over God's omnipotence, similarly being limited by the moral-cum-causal law of Karmic retribution does not go against God's fairness or omnipotence. Like a mathematician who shows *mastery* rather than slavery by following rules of deduction, God follows the law of Karma because he is the Master of morality.

Some recondite Upanishadic texts quoted by commentators upsets this defense by insisting that it is *God* who drives some people to immoral actions because He wishes to throw them down whereas others are made to act well because God wishes to uplift them. This diagnosis puts the blame of arbitrary unfairness back on God and no frisky "Leelā" – account can save Him really!

But this is *not* the standard view. Ramakrishna never calls God the real doer in *this* sense as the original motivator of any *first* act by a human. Indeed, as Karl Potter has noted: the beginningless pre-existence of every conscious agent in Hindu thought – apart from acquitting God from the responsibility for abetting or even allowing the first sin – seems to remove one serious obstacle to squaring freedom with causal necessity. To be free is to be caused to act by oneself. A Karmically determined agent is free because she is self-determined. It is her *own* past which fixes her tendencies which in turn lead her to make further choices. And since there is no *initial* act – the moral-Karmic quality of which any arbitrary creator could be made responsible for, the responsibility lies all along on one's *own* antecedent actions. We are captives to some extent, but that too only to our own pasts.

Ramakrishna considers and rejects soft determinism. It was

suggested to him by several learned men that a human agent is like a cow tied to a pole with a long rope. She can move freely as much as the slack of the rope permits. When his physician Dr. Sarkar uses this analogy Ramakrishna wonders: "Does this analogy come from some English Book?"[7] – hinting that such compatibilism is foreign to his own understanding. His own argument for embracing determinism does not go through either God's foreknowledge or through any appeal to the universal sway of the law of Karma. Strangely enough, it springs from the proto-scientific law of psycho-physical causation.

When you act, he says (*Gospel*, p. 883), you are driven by a belief that something desirable is going to result from such and such action. You feel joy as you think of this desirable effect. This joy of anticipation moves you to act. A man's greed for gold coins coupled with his belief that a jar full of gold coins is buried in a certain place propels him to dig. He also gives the convincing example of a cannabis-addicted person preparing a joint of pot – with a beaming face. It is his belief and pro-attitude – as Davidson would put it – which cause him to behave in a certain fashion. So we are back to the source of Vivekananda's argument. Every apparently free act is psychologically caused by effort which in turn is caused by desire and belief. We are conditioned by environment, habit and the current cerebral states and our past life experiences to believe, wish and expect certain things. Then beliefs and desires move us to act in the way we do. All such caused mental events are strictly subsumable under strict law-like connections – whether in a particular case we can locate the right laws or not. So no act is really free.

Having given this rather untraditional psychological-causal argument for denying freedom Ramakrishna enriches the account with an analogy which he ascribed to Vedanta although I cannot locate it anywhere in the Vedanta literature. This is the imagery of

vegetables jumping about in a pot of boiling water. It is the fire underneath the pot which is making them jump.

Elsewhere he uses the analogy of a machine-driven doll the spirit of which anticipates Daniel Dennett's statement about a hundred years later that we should "think of ourselves, imaginatively, as organic robots" programmed and controlled by Mother Nature.

The big difference will be that instead of Mother Nature Ramakrishna would speak of Mother Kali as the real programmer. If we look upon the dancing Goddess as the personification of the ever-active Sāmkhya Prakriti (with the big difference that Kali is identical with live consciousness) – Mother Nature and Mother Kali would not be so far removed from each other!

SIX

At this point let me quickly 'deconstruct' a pertinent song which Ramakrishna was fond of singing, and from which the title of this essay is taken:

In the Bazaar of this Samsāra
My Dark Mother you are flying Kites.
Look, up they soar by the wind of hope
Held fast by Māyā's string!

With excelling craftsmanship you have made the Kites
Out of your own elements
You have given the strings a cutting edge
By starching them with worldly lures.

Of a hundred thousand Kites
Only one or two snap out free
And at that you giggle and clap
O Mother Divine![8]

Notice that with this song Ramakrishna synthesizes six diverse elements of his philosophy:

(1) *A non-dualistic metaphysics*: where the entire show is run by a single self – the Ātmam-Brahman who is playing all by Herself. That is why – according to the rules of kite flying – when her kites are cut off she ought to *lose* yet that is not her defeat – but her own victory because even the imagined opponent is she herself. Hence she laughs and claps at the liberation of any lucky individual kite. She herself of course is free – because she is outside time or Time (Kāla) Herself.

(2) *A spiritualistic ethic*: where the supreme duty of human life is to achieve the realization that the Mother alone exists and that we are but kites in her hand and even we the kites are made of her own elements.

(3) *The Karma-Doctrine*: where the starch of worldly lures make the clash between the strings rough and painful. The strings erode each other by rubbing sharply against themselves, like Karma exhausting itself by Bhoga, bringing liberation or snapping of the strings nearer.

(4) *A playful Goddess*: with absolute control over the material and mental world, but doing it all just for fun – the spontaneous brimming over of her essential bliss.

(5) Possibility of liberation from the bondage of Māyā – from the cycle of rebirth – a rare but real chance for a few kites.

(6) *The theory of psychological causation*: by the imagery of "the wind of hope" – driving the kites to and fro – as if freely but actually by deterministic laws.

Apart from these suggestive hints, Ramakrishna once again returns to the heart of the issue when someone (the younger Naren) asks:

"Sir, have we any free will?" He says, "Just try to find out who this 'I' is. While you are searching for 'I', 'He' comes out. ... God alone is the Doer...."[9]

So, as long as I think I am an *object* distinct from God – I am not free – I am a hopelessly tied kite going through a fake frolic of freedom. When I realize that I am made of the kite-flying mothers' own elements – or even more accurately I am She – her freedom automatically becomes mine. But with this realization that the Dark Mother is the same as Ātman Brahman. Ramakrishna says in another song: "You eat up both virtue and vice" – ethics ceases. Whatever happens in the universe becomes my will.

Few of us notice that Vivekananda highly recommends Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* in one of his lectures.[10] He even says that he would have liked to write such a children's book himself! At the end of Alice's long and madly eventful dream we find Tweedledum warning Alice: "Do not wake up the king because you are just a character in his dream. If he stops dreaming you will go out of existence just like a blown out flame!" Alice is perplexed. She thought she was dreaming up the king. How can the king be dreaming of her?

Perhaps Vivekananda appreciated such *Yoga-Vāshistha*-like quality of these metaphysical stories told by the mathematical logician.

Vivekananda's total view about our main issue seems to be roughly like this: Neither in the sense of freedom *to* choose nor in the sense of freedom *from* causal law – but in some profounder sense (that perhaps K. C. Bhattacharya makes clearer) *freedom* is the essence of our real subjective self. But this free self does not ever *act* – it is a mere witness. In its self-forgetful sleep – like Alice – it dreams up a causally law-bound universe. Within this dreamland

every event must have a cause. But here again – the individual self is having yet another dream or illusion and thinks that unlike other natural objects its own ego can do, not do or do something in different ways. Since this ego functions in a deterministic natural world such liberty must be an illusion. But the deterministic world itself is a dream.

The illusion of our freedom is rendered possible because we retain an impression of the real freedom which our witnessing consciousness (the onlooker bird which does not eat) really possesses and superimposes it upon our functioning ego (the eater bird). Both in ultimate reality, and in this illusion within a dream free will prevails. It is only the middle plane of natural and Karmic causation where we are stripped of all freedom. Hence Vivekananda's comment: "from freedom it comes, in bondage it rests, and goes back into that freedom again." Since this freedom is *not* the freedom to go against any foreign nature, nor is it a freedom to assert any false egoism – this is best realized through a total surrender to God's will: "Thy will be done" – does not sound like slavery because the addressee and the supplicating devotee are at bottom the same. Such surrender is no subjection of one's freedom; it is reclaiming one's freedom as a subject.

If the kite-flying Mother is a free doer so am I. But perhaps I cannot *assert* that until the kite which had assumed the role of *me* – the ego-equipped distinct individual, snaps out of the game. Vivekananda makes this point in a sentence which displays almost a K. C. Bhattacharya-like complexity so uncharacteristic of this arch-orator:

"But that which has become converted into the will, which was not the will before, but which, when it fell into this mould of space, time and causation, became converted into the human will, is free...."[11]

By realizing the machine-like dependence of this smaller ego upon the real self of all selves – a human subject becomes the real self-ruled doer – as Pānini defines the grammatical category of a *subject*: "*Svatantrah Kartā*". Freedom is reinstated in such a metaphysics but 'free *will*' still remains a misnomer because when freedom is realized willing drops out.

As long as we are in the realm of the "OR" and "WHAT-IF", indecisive and ignorant of the future, as long as we cannot honestly claim to have stopped wishing for anything whatsoever, Sri Ramakrishna would urge us to convert our selfish and altruistic desires to prayers. Prayer is not only permissible, it is obligatory. He showed by his own inimitable example (a paradoxical notion no doubt!) how all that we utter, loudly or under our breath, can be transformed into prayer. Abhinavagupta had prayed to the Mother: "May there be not even a fraction of a second in my life which goes without a hymn, repetition of your name, worship or meditative prayer". As long as individual freedom is ***felt***, its best use is to ***pray so that all our acts become prayers.***

How does that solve all the "phallozofical" tensions between the illusoriness of freedom and the freedom required to pray? The brief answer is: We are not really free, but undeniably have been hardwired to feel free. Our feeling of freedom is at the root of our ability to desire and will. Each time I pray, I also offer up that freedom which we provisionally 'borrow' from the really free playful Mother-Consciousness for the sake of that prayer back to the Mother, and relinquish my individual ego by ending the prayer with that ultimate mantra "***not-mine=na-mama=namah***". *Namastasyai, namastyasyai, namastasyai, namo, namah.* Poised between ignorance and knowledge, between the vyavahārika and pāramārthika, between freedom and determinism, repetition of namaskara is the best "abhyāsa" we can engage in. We cannot repeat that magic

word "*namah*" often enough. So, after all the ethico-metaphysical discourse of the *Bhagavadgita*, Arjuna is made to repeat "*namah*" a thousand times and yet again, more and more.[12] Like Krishna, Sri Ramakrishna is also just telling us one thing "*mām namaskuru*".

Notes and References

1 Free translation from: Sri M., *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, Complete Edition, Ananda Publishers: Kolkata, 1990, p. 592

2 "The Free Soul," *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama: Kolkata, 1964, 9th ed., Vol. III, pp. 6-18

3 Ibid., p. 14

4 "Freedom" in "Karmayoga", Ch. VII, *Complete Works*, Vol. I, pp. 95-96

5 Swami Nikhilananda, tr., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 418, Reproduced from the webpage of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission: http://www.belurmath.org/gospel/index.htm

6 See: Kalidas Bhattacharya's paper "The Status of the Individual in Indian Mythology", in Charles Moore, ed., *The Indian Mind*, p. 19

7 Free translation from: Sri M., *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, Complete Edition, Ananda Publishers: Kolkata, 1990, p. 194. Ramakrishna said, "Even Jadu Mullick told me this."

8 Ibid., p. 35-6

9 Swami Nikhilananda, tr., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 889, Reproduced from the webpage of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission: http://www.belurmath.org/gospel/index.htm

10 *Complete Works*, Vol. III, p. 23

11 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 96

12 *Bhagavadgita*:11.39

Sri Ramakrishna: from the Feminist Perspective

Sabujkoli Sen

Feminism in India is a recent phenomenon. It started with the Renaissance and liberalism of the 19th century. Feminism means mainly the freedom struggle, a movement to overcome the discrimination, the oppression against women. David Bouchier in his *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the United States* (1984) gives a definition of feminism. He says feminism "includes any form of opposition to any form of social, personal, or economical discrimination which women suffer because of their sex."[1] In contemporary culture, feminism challenges the foundations of our language, thought, social and religious institutions, political power structure and the nature of spirituality. The feminist thinkers challenge the traditional religions and spirituality for their rejection of, exclusiveness to and subordination of women. In the history of religious studies we find that discussions about spirituality and religion are conducted by professional theologians and feminine voices are rare. The feminists challenge important aspects of religious teachings. They demand the reformation and reconstruction of religion to support the full dignity of women. Before discussing 'Sri Ramakrishna: from the Feminist Perspective' let us see the arguments in brief given by the feminists against traditional religions in general. Feminists have charged that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are sexist religions with

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a male God and all traditional religions in general have traditions of male leadership that legitimize the superiority of men in family and society. Though feminist voices express concern and protest about many specific issues, but fundamentally all criticisms and campaigns are rooted in an outright challenge to patriarchy and androcentrism. Generally patriarchy means a hypothetical social system based on the absolute authority of the father or an elderly male over the family group.

Ursula King, in her *Women and Spirituality* presents the arguments of the feminists. The feminists allege that wherever one looks in the world, religious institutions are dominated by men. Women are largely invisible, or at least marginal to the public positions of power, authority and hierarchy. There are hardly ever official 'spokeswomen' of religious institutions whereas the women at the grass-root level almost everywhere form the majority of participants in ordinary day-to-day religious life. Whilst God as an all-encompassing Ultimate Reality transcends the difference of sex, this Reality has in many religions been predominantly presented as 'father', rather than 'mother'.[2]

The feminists have raised another question: Is there any room for women in religion? Sometimes one thinks not. It is therefore not surprising that different feminists take different stances towards religion. Some reject it outright, they simply see religion as an external institution, authority and power structure which keeps people in a state of dependence and thereby prevents them from acquiring autonomy, from the will to actively shape their lives and take full responsibility for it. Related to it another question arises: What status and role do particular religions assign to women? What are the patterns of participation or exclusion from ritual and liturgy? What kind of religious authority can women wield in what kind of religions institution? Are women given equal status in the

religious life, i.e. in the priesthood, where it exists, and in various forms of monasticism?

Here the challenge is about the lack of official recognition, the absence of power and status in visible hierarchies, the subservient and frequent invisible role played by many women throughout the world. It may be mentioned here that like feminism, the concepts of equality, freedom, hierarchy are also Western concepts. The most decisive difference between the Semitic and the non-Semitic religions lies in the doctrine of human being. Man as a personal being endowed with freedom and the consequent responsibility for his own actions is not fully recognized in the non-Semitic religions of the East. In Advaita Vedanta, for example, man as an empirical ego arises just like a single wave in the vast ocean of Infinity (Brahman), to be reabsorbed again within it. In like manner, Buddhism views man as nothing more than the meeting point of five ever changing elements (*pancaskandhas*). The general emphasis of these religions is not on man conceived as a personal agent but on some sort of impersonal cosmic moral law towards which the entire course of nature, human life and society are oriented. In fact, anthropocentrism is practically unknown in the East. But this anthropocentrism is the very heart of the Semitic religions. In Semitic religions the focus is not so much on the cosmic moral law as on the individual man and his freedom. Again, there is also a difference in the concept of creation. In the non-Semitic religions the creation theory is cyclical. There is neither beginning nor end. In Semitic religions the Creator is a male God who first created Adam – the first man in the universe. From his ribs Eve was created. From the very beginning there is hierarchy. But in religions of Indian origin the question of hierarchy does not arise. Indian philosophy and religion with its concept of values, ultimate goal in life grew in this context. When we try to analyze and examine the Indian tradition from the Western point of view we get confused.

A cross-cultural historical study of the role and status of women in different religious traditions shows that the less differentiated the religion and society is, the greater is the scope for participation of women. Thus it is true on the whole that women had higher positions in archaic, ancient, tribal and relatively non-institutionalized forms of religion and Hinduism falls in this category. Keeping these points in mind now I shall try to understand Sri Ramakrishna and his ideas.

When Sri Ramakrishna was born, the British rule was well established in India. The Renaissance of Bengal, as well as of India started at the beginning of 19th Century. Raja Rammohan Roy, the pioneer of our Renaissance died at Bristol in 1833, three years before Sri Ramakrishna's birth. Satee system was abolished. When Sri Ramakrishna came to Dakshineswar, the Brahmo religion was in its peak form. In Calcutta there were leaders like Devendranath Tagore, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen, and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. Various reformation movements were launched. The Brahmo Samaj launched a movement to reform the Hindu society and religion. The women's education and emancipation, removal of caste system etc. were in their agenda. Sri Ramakrishna was by no means a social reformer nor did he want to be in the conventional sense of the term. Though Sri Ramakrishna did not show any interest in the social reform movements of the age but what he did in his life i.e., initiating his followers without any caste discrimination, and his concepts of women's position in society and in religious order, left a mark on the Indian social reform movements.

Let us now see whether the charges labeled against religion by the feminist thinkers are applicable to Sri Ramakrishna or not. The main charge of the feminists against religion is that the traditional religions are male-centric with a male God, male leadership and patriarch.

According to Sri Ramakrishna God can be worshipped in female form also. Most of the religions of the world consider God as man – a male figure. Whereas Sri Ramakrishna gave the idea of the motherhood of God a sort of a special sanctity. He worshipped God as the mother of the Universe and he often used to say, that all women represent the Divine Motherhood on earth. Sri Ramakrishna said, among all the relationship, all the attitudes towards God, the motherhood of God was the best and purest one. So the first charge of the feminists does not apply to Sri Ramakrishna.

Not only that, Sri Ramakrishna with a firm conviction said: "When I think of the Supreme Being as inactive – neither creating nor preserving nor destroying – I call Him Brahman or *Purusha*, the Impersonal God. When I think of Him as active – creating, preserving, destroying – I call Him Sakti or Maya or *Prakriti*, the Personal God. But the distinction between them does not mean a difference. The Personal and the Impersonal are the same thing, like milk and its whiteness, or the diamond and its lustre, the snake and its wriggling motion. It is impossible to conceive of one without the other. The Divine Mother and Brahman are one."[3] Sri Ramakrishna went far beyond the distinction between male and female. So the allegation of androcentrism cannot be applied to Sri Ramakrishna.

To Sri Ramakrishna the absolute and the relative were equally divine. He saw Kali appearing in so many garbs. He saw Mother in the prostitute Ramani, and in a little Muslim girl. To him all women were the veritable images of Sakti, the primal power – all women were Anandamayee. For the first time in the religious history of the world this idea was preached by a spiritual person. It is very difficult for ordinary people to conceptualize women in this way.

The genuine reverence for womanhood preached by Sri Ramakrishna was intrinsically a superior social attitude than that of

compassion, pity and a sense of male-superiority and righteousness that motivated most of the advocates of social reforms. Swami Vivekananda once described Sri Ramakrishna as the saviour of women. Sri Ramakrishna after practicing the 64 Tantras current in India concluded that *pancamakara* was not absolutely necessary. He maintained filial attitude towards women even while practicing the tantrik mode of worship. It may be observed that the place which Sri Ramakrishna assigned to women was far higher than which the passion of man might reach. As opposed to androcentrism, the psychoanalysts may charge him of 'gynocentrism'. It may be noted here, that in the opinion of some psychoanalysts like Sudhir Kakar the male-self part of Sri Ramakrishna's personality was split off in early childhood after his father's death and tended to grow, if at all, rather slowly. In the contrary the female-self part of his personality, dominated his inner psychic reality.[4] Swami Saradananda also noticed this both male-female characteristics in his personality; sometimes feminine characteristics were predominant and again sometimes masculine characteristics prevailed. For his Naribhava, the attitude of a woman (sadhana as Radha), acceptance of Striguru (woman teacher) and Matri sadhana (worship of God as Mother) some may term his attitude as 'gynocentric'. It may be mentioned here that his first disciple was also a woman, his wife Sarada Devi.

We have already mentioned that the feminists question regarding the status and role of women in a particular religion. Are women given equal status in the religious life i.e. priesthood? Since the advent of Sri Ramakrishna a new age has started where men and women are given equal rights in spirituality and religion. Sri Ramakrishna himself accepted the sannyasini Bhairavi Jogeshwari as one of his gurus, and did spiritual practices under her tutelage. He had said that she was not just learned, but knowledge personified. As even an exemplary aspirant like Sri Ramakrishna accepted her as his guru, it proves that women do not only have equal rights

but can also reach such heights and become a spiritual guru. Sri Ramakrishna gave ochre cloth to Gouri Ma who eventually started the Saradeshwari Ashrama as instructed by Sri Ramakrishna to educate the Bengali women. Sri Ramakrishna had a good number of women devotees. Among them were the frequent visitors Nistarini Devi, Aghoremoni Devi (known as Gopaler Ma), Golap Ma, and Jogin Ma. There were other female devotees also whom Sri Ramakrishna himself encouraged to visit more often. He taught them how to practice japa, or how to worship. Sri Ramakrishna correctly understood all the moods of women. The sight of fasting women pained him deeply. Sri Ramakrishna's attitude towards women is presented in the reminiscence of a woman devotee: "To us (women devotees) Sri Ramakrishna did not usually seem to be a man at all. It seemed that he was one of us. That is why we did not feel the slightest shyness or hesitation in his presence, as we normally do in the presence of men. If, however, such a feeling came on rare occasions, we forgot it immediately and would express to him our thoughts without any hesitation whatever."[5] The fact that he accepted a woman as his guru, practiced spirituality both in male and female grabs and presented gerua (ochre clothes) to Gouri Ma, signifies his acceptance of women's equal status in the spiritual sphere.

'Sri Ramakrishna: from the Feminist Perspective' will be incomplete without the reference of Sarada Devi. Through his consort – Sarada Devi – Sri Ramakrishna presented his own ideal of womanhood – the role of woman in a household and the role of a partner in higher spiritual life. It is well-known that Sri Ramakrishna's marriage to Sarada Devi was never consummated. It is also known to all that in the year 1872 Sri Ramakrishna worshipped his 18 year old wife Sarada Devi as 'Shodoshi'. Worshipping one's wife was not new in India. Among the tantrikas it was a usual practice. What was unique with Sri Ramakrishna was

that, while after worshipping the consort the tantrikas used to live a conjugal life, Sri Ramakrishna established the truth of spiritual marriage in the plane of soul alone, and not on the physical. He always treated his wife with reverence and looked upon her as the representative of the Divine Mother. He himself spoke about this worship to his devotees and thus gave Sarada Devi a special place in the Ramakrishna movement. Not only that, he sent two of his young devotees to get initiated from Sarada Devi. Gradually Sarada Devi became a pillar of strength for the Ramakrishna movement. This is also a fact that in the history of world's religions Sarada Devi was the first Head (Sanghajanani) of a monastic organization run by the monks only. At the same time she was the life force and inspiration of Saradeshwari Ashrama, named after her and founded by a monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna – Gouri Ma. It is also known to all that Sarada Devi's decision was the final word in any matter in the Ramakrishna Order. Even Sri Ramakrishna himself didn't dare to go against her wishes. This phenomenon also drew the attention of the feminist scholars. Ursula King in her book *Women and Spirituality* writes: "Closer to our own time there is Sarada Devi, the wife of the late nineteenth-century Hindu saint Ramakrishna, who became a guru in her own right and subsequently inspired the foundation of Hindu women convents of future generations."[6] The sociologists have noticed that at the time of a new religious breakthrough when a charismatic personality – an enlightened being – shapes a new way of life, new seeds of liberations are sown. In such a period of flux women, in their support of new movements of reform or radical renewal, often have greater freedom than is customary in their environment and play a crucial role in the early development of a religion.

However, Sri Ramakrishna's attitude towards his wife did not go unnoticed – it has been criticized time and again. There was a debate and some speculation on Sri Ramakrishna's marriage to

Sarada Devi and their marital relation. The Brahmo Samaj leader Pratap Chandra Majumdar in a letter to Max Müller accused Sri Ramakrishna of 'almost barbarous treatment' to his wife. One of his accusations was that Sri Ramakrishna neglected his wife till she was seventeen years of age. There were others who thought like Pratap Chandra Majumdar, and even today some of her women admirers feel that Sarada Devi was forced to live alone like a widow even with her husband alive. They also accuse Sri Ramakrishna for marrying a six year old girl when he was twenty two years old. They also note that Sarada Devi once expressed her desire to be the biological mother of a child. Over and above this, Sarada Devi had to live in the small Nahabatkhana at Dakshineswar, had to share that little space with others and her only duty was to serve Sri Ramakrishna and his devotees; sometimes she could not see her husband even once a day or once a month.

Regarding Majumder's charges against Sri Ramakrishna, Max Müller said the act could hardly be called barbarous in India, where it was a recognized custom that a little girl, as Sarada Devi was when Sri Ramakrishna married her, should remain at her parents' home for years before migration to the house of her husband or his parents. Max Müller agreed with the personal testimony of Swami Vivekananda who claimed that Sri Ramakrishna treated his young wife Sarada with every consideration and kindness, which Sarada Devi also corroborated later.

Max Müller also cited the testimony of Mrs. Ole Bull, who was the first non-Indian to meet Sarada Devi. From her testimony the spirit, personality and intelligence of Sarada Devi becomes evident. We find the metamorphosis of a village girl under the tutelage of her husband. Mrs. Ole Bull said: "When asked to define the obedience to a Guru, who in her case was her husband, she replied to the effect that when one has chosen a Guru or teacher, one should listen to

and obey all his directions for spiritual advancement but in things temporal one could most truly serve a Guru by using one's own best discernment, even if at times it was not in agreement with the suggestions given."[7] Sarada Devi's statement proves that she was not any ordinary woman who had to accept whatever her husband wished or asked. Whatever she did was her decision and not of others.

Mrs. Ole Bull again wrote in her letter: "When she gladly gave her husband, to whom she had been united by child-marriage, her assent that he should lead a sannaysi's life, she gained his intimate friendship and became his disciple. She had also taken the vow of poverty, austerity and chastity, and renouncing the joy of a natural mother, she became with him the spiritual parent of many children."[8] Max Müller therefore concluded: "If she was satisfied with her life, who has any right to complain; and is love between husband and wife really impossible without procreation of children?"[9]

Amiya P. Sen in his *Ramakrishna Paramahamsa* raises a question which very often arises in the minds of the women admirers of Sri Ramakrishna. The question is: If Sri Ramakrishna wanted to lead a monastic life why did he agree to marriage?[10] In his *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga* Swami Saradananda explains that through this marriage Sri Ramakrishna was practically setting an example that total continence is possible even in conjugal life. After all, for an unmarried man, it might have been easy to preach it since he had never been sufficiently tempted. It seems that Sri Ramakrishna wanted to lead a monastic life.

Amiya P. Sen raises another point, he says: "On closer scrutiny, Swami Saradananda's thesis appears to border of hagiographic admiration. First, it is an error to presume that Sri Ramakrishna was pledged to a life of monasticism; if he had been so, he

certainly would not have broken the pledge. Second, it is also an error to imagine that sexual desire is produced and fulfilled only in wedlock. By marrying Sarada Devi, he was fulfilling a social or ritual obligation a samskara. Here, too, there is a tradition of having a child, specifically a son, that is also samskara which Sri Ramakrishna did not fulfill."[11]

The women admirers of Sri Ramakrishna right from Jyotimoyee Devi to my girl students and my colleagues accuse him of being a misogynist. The frequent use of the phrase in his discourse 'Kamini Kanchan Tyaga' is the reason for this misunderstanding. Sri Ramakrishna warned his devotees that women and gold were the biggest impediments to spiritual progress. How can a person to whom all women are representatives of Divine Mother, make such a remark. This has appeared derogatory to the women folk in general especially in the modern age where the emphasis is on women's progress and equal rights.

Swami Nikhilananda, in the explanatory note added to *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* wrote: "By it (Kamini Kanchan) he meant only lust and greed, the baneful influence of which retards the aspirant's spiritual growth. He used the word 'Kamini' or 'women' as a concrete term for the sex instinct when addressing his men devotees."[12] He advised the women, on the other hand, to shun 'men'. Kanchan or gold, symbolizes greed, which is the other obstacle to spiritual life. Sri Ramakrishna never taught his disciples to hate any woman or womankind in general.

Sri Ramakrishna used to train his women disciples similarly. Swami Saradananda wrote that once he said to one of them who was particularly soft-hearted: "Suppose you feel that a certain acquaintance of yours takes great trouble and helps you in all matters, but unable to control the infatuation for beauty, his weak mind begins pining for you, should you in that case give a free rein

to your kindness to him or be severe upon him, deal him hard kicks and live far away from him."[13]

To the male spiritual aspirants Sri Ramakrishna used to say: "... there are women endowed with vidya Śakti, so also there are women with avidya Śakti. A woman endowed with spiritual attributes leads a man to God, but a woman who is the embodiment of delusion makes him forget God and drowns him in the ocean of worldliness."[14] Similarly we can make a distinction among the men, having deva bhava and men with asura bhava. Sarada Devi in a very strong language warned one of her widow devotees not to believe any man, even if he comes in the grab of God.

What Sri Ramakrishna wanted to mean is that everywhere it is true that sexually alluring woman or man and greed for material wealth bind a person to this world, and then he or she loses all his or her freedom. It is for the sake of lust that one needs wealth, that in turn, entails bondage where a man or woman is no longer free to do what she or he wants.

To Bijoy Krishna Goswami, he said: "You can see for yourself what accepting service under another does to a man, don't you? And do you see how the highly educated people, masters of English language, have to suffer kicks from the master's boots everyday? At the root of all this is Kamini. Once you marry and have domestic life, it is impossible to wind it up. It is thus insult after insult is heaped on the man and he has to undergo the terrible pain of servitude."[15] This is also true in the case of women, in a different perspective. The root cause for the suffering of women is also lust and greed.

That Sri Ramakrishna was not a misogynist is evident from his compassion to women, his concern for them, which he conveyed to Gouri Ma. That he didn't discriminate between women from different strata of society is evident from his attitude towards the

stage actresses. In the 19th century Calcutta where the elite society, personalities like Rabindranath Tagore, Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Heramba Chandra Moitra shunned both theatre performances and artists because some of them were well-known prostitutes, Sri Ramakrishna visited theatres and loved to watch them. When Binodini Dasi the famous actress bowed down in reverence before Sri Ramakrishna, he blessed her. It is interesting to note that Sibnath Sastri confessed that he stopped visiting Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar after knowing this. It is also known that many women of disrepute changed the direction of their lives by resettling in areas close to Dakshineswar. Some of them were Chapala Sundari (Kalurma) a Brahmin widow forced to prostitution, Moksada Sundari, a former actress, Thako, who often visited Kali temple of Dakshineswar but stayed away from Sri Ramakrishna, and Padmarani, a singer who it is said at his bidding took to Kirtan singing. Sri Ramakrishna showered his compassion and grace on them.[16]

Sri Ramakrishna's repeated warning of shunning Kamini and Kanchan was not for all of his visitors. Three types of people used to visit Dakshineswar. The first type of people was interested in sight-seeing and visiting the temple. Sri Ramakrishna used to tell them to visit Rashmoni's garden. His discourse was surely not meant for them. This type was mainly interested in worldly enjoyment. There was a second type of people who enjoyed the world but at the same time also wanted to keep their mind on God. And the third type was totally devoted to spirituality, to ascetics – Sri Ramakrishna's discourse was specially meant for these two types of people.

Among these spiritual aspirants there were young students, doctors, officials working under the British Government, Brahmo devotees and other professionals. Among the other visitors there were parents unable to overcome the death of their child, childless widows, and women deserted by their husbands. Except the young

student devotees the rest were householders and the discourse of *Kathamrita* was chiefly meant for them. The young students and young devotees were secretly moulding themselves under Sri Ramakrishna's direct supervision and tutelage.

The important thing is that this prescribed avoidance of women was only for the beginners. Once mystical knowledge is gained sexual differentiations too vanish. A devotee once asked him: "Should we hate women?" Sri Ramakrishna answered: "One who has realized God ceases to see the women in her carnal form. Henceforth, he need not have fear of women for he begins to see in her, the manifestation of the Goddess. He then begins to worship every woman as the Divine Mother."[17]

Life is a journey – a journey towards perfection. Indian Philosophy speaks of four ideals which serve as means to reach the end of human endeavour. They are known as *Purusartha*-s, and consist of *Dharma* (righteousness), *Artha* (wealth), *Kama* (desire) and *Moksa* (liberation). The *Purusartha*-s deal with the covetable things of life. These are also known as values of life. Every man wants to be happy, wants pleasure and success. Fulfillment of desire is a valid goal of life. To fulfill that goal, i.e. desire one needs wealth (*Artha*). But both these *Artha* and *Kama* should not be such as to deprive others or to exploit them. To control unrestrained desires for pleasure and wealth another value is essential. That is *Dharma* or righteousness inspired by the considerations for other men. Both *Artha* and *Kama* are not intrinsically good. They are good only in so far as they lead to righteous living or a life of duty. It is the pursuit of virtue that makes wealth and desire acceptable in the Hindu scheme of things. *Artha* and *Kama* do not satisfy man permanently. The hunger of the soul is fulfilled by attaining *Moksa* or freedom. This freedom is different from the modern Western concept of freedom, i.e. freedom in society. This ideal of freedom

can be realized in the realm of spirit – and the bliss – that follows is everlasting. The basic requirement for achieving this state is renunciation – renunciation of any kind of desire. Then only a person will know his true self. He will be liberated. It is known to all that to Sri Ramakrishna the ultimate goal of human life was God realization. That was "The End". But he did not ignore or despise the other ends of life, like *Kama, Artha* and *Dharma*. According to the devotees' *adhikarabheda* – tendency, temperament and nature, he would advise some people to live the householders life, do its duties, have children and earn money to maintain the family, but with the knowledge that wealth and desire were not the end of life, they did not enable one to see God. Again to some of his devotes according to their nature, mental make-up he would advise them to renounce the desire of pleasure, to shun lust and greed in the strictest sense of the term.

It should be noted that Sri Ramakrishna never forced anyone to follow his path or discourse. His discourse was for those only who visited him at Dakshineswar or attended his meetings in Calcutta. His discourse was meant for the seekers, for seekers of truth, seekers of liberation. Indian philosophy prescribes two different ways for achieving value of life. They are *pravritti marga* and *nivritti marga*. If any one chooses the former and wants to enjoy the life, fulfill his carnal desire, he is free to do so. But if one chooses the second, the *nivritti marga* – the path described as "*Ksurasya dhara duratah nisitaya durgama patha*" – and opts for self realization, God realization – then all religions of the world are unanimous here that one has to take leave from desire and passion. For men they are woman and wealth and for women they are man and wealth.

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Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita as a Text

Sri Ramakrishna singing and dancing in divine ecstasy, a painting by Nandalal Bose

On the Ramakrishna Kathamrita

Sudipta Kaviraj

Should I take any interest in the *Kathamrita*?

Reading happens in a meeting between a particular reader and a specific text; and the success of the reading depends on whether the very specificities of these two can produce something interesting. Modern cultures are particularly riven by the divide between faith and skepticism; and in one sense that makes reading the *Kathamrita* very hard by someone like me. This difference is not like the difference between various sects differing about the nature and presence of God: it runs much deeper. It is a difference where the two sides often find their positions incomprehensible. Yet from another point of view, it is also a very appropriate reading, because Kathamrita is probably the first text in Bengali culture that is suffused with a vivid sense of this emerging problem in modern life.

In our traditional argumentative intellectual culture, there were serious and well-understood procedures for discussion and debate. Before someone said something on a subject, the audience wanted to know if he had an entitlement to say something – to consume his own and others' time speaking about the theme. This was called the question of *adhikāra* in pre-modern terminology. Modern commentators usually reject such restrictions with impatience; but I believe there were two sides to this procedure – one of which should indeed be rejected, but the other retained in the interest of engaging in serious disputation. The idea of who had an *adhikāra* to think

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about a disputed subject could be determined by simple inherited social rank of caste – a repugnant and unjustifiable restriction. It is plausible to demand that only those who have read *śāstras* carefully ought to talk about them; but if these are written in an esoteric language like Sanskrit, and large sections of society are barred from even learning the language because of their caste, this becomes a simple rigging of the rules, and is justly considered repugnant. But that should not obscure the fact that the original, general demand was an entirely plausible one – that only those who have a serious engagement with a text and its subject matter have an *adhikara* to discuss it: if others enter into it, it simply leads to confusion and waste of time. From that angle of vision, is there any sense in a reader like me, with no religious belief, trying to read a text like the *Ramakrishna Kathamrita*?

From this belief, and the underlying supposition that belief or lack of belief in religion is a fundamental divide in philosophical perspective, I initially did not have much interest in the Ramakrishna Kathamrita. My line of reasoning was the following. Since Ramakrishna was undoubtedly one of the major religious figures of modern India, and his reflections centred closely on the availability of a religious view in modern times, and I had no belief in a religious view of life, my reading would be so fundamentally out of sympathy with the central concerns of the work, that it was likely to generate only misunderstandings, or a critical rejection that remained unilluminating to both sides. Atheists consider religious beliefs to be simple errors, or untenable exaggerations; and there is usually no interesting point in asking why somebody made a mistake in thinking about the world by believing that something exists that really does not. On their side, religious people too believe that unbelievers simply deny the existence of the most significant existence in the world, the sole source of moral reasoning and the possibility of good life. Those who deny God are ethically nihilistic, morally unreliable, and therefore, there is no point in a conversation across this divide from both points of view.

In recent years, I have changed my mind about the futility of this discussion – for two reasons. The first is an historical reason, the second is in a manner of speaking related to the philosophical undertaking of radicalism. The historical reason for a careful reading of the Ramakrishna Kathamrita is straightforward. The momentous changes in Bengali intellectual life that occurred through the 19th century – which ushered in a period of evolving modernity in our society – were predicated on the transformation of religious life – on the changing conceptions of what it meant to lead a good life from a religious point of view. Influence of Western rationalism undermined some of the critical beliefs of Hindu and Muslim religious practice, and, to some, this threatened to make it impossible to retain belief in God and His ordainment of human life. Among those thinkers who resisted this critical possibility, and restored confidence of modern people in the possibility of a religious life even under conditions of modernity, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa was pre-eminent. Eventually, due to the force of these intellectual interventions, the historical path of Indian modernity came to be significantly different from the patterns seen in the familiar histories of Western Europe. To understand the onset of intellectual modernity and its crucial reconfigurations of ideas and intellectual life generally, it is impossible to bypass his thinking, it is so constitutive of its times. What was truly remarkable about Ramakrishna was his entire at-home-ness both in a completely traditional form of religious belief, and in a fast-changing world of colonial modernity. Presumably, he drew his faith from the belief that if religious truths were truly absolute, they must hold at all times and all spaces without exception. Since most religions come from a cultural horizon before modernity, this is a central concern for most religious traditions. But Ramakrishna seems to have been entirely unworried by its challenges, and the waves of doubting arguments that the emerging modern culture threw at him. As we shall see, Ramakrishna's exception consisted in the fact that unlike many other truly remarkable religious thinkers

of the time, he did not make a single concession to the advancing challenge of modern rationalist unbelief. This could not be said to be true – at least to the same extent – of the Brahmos, or of Bankim, of Bhudev, or even Keshab Chandra Sen. Ramakrishna was the only religious figure who seemed to be truly unperturbed by modernity, yet also entirely untouched by it. This defiance of secularity by Ramakrishna and other religious thinkers stamped itself on Indian modernity as its distinctive character, creating a social space in which on the one side modern processes are expanding really fast, and yet religious life remains undiminished, though constantly changing its forms, a modernity that is of a wholly different character from the West. Consider in our own times, the endless ingenuity and artistic creativity around the Durgapuja festivities – its peculiar ability to observe a traditional worship by unfailingly new forms every year. Anyone who is interested in the peculiarity of Indian modernity, should pay serious attention to the thoughts of a figure like Ramakrishna.

My second reason for interest in Ramakrishna is far less obvious; and it is to an extent an allegorical connection. It is quite likely that both religious people and political radicals might find my argument quite implausible. In a brilliant, though somewhat one-sided essay on the underlying unity of thousands of years of Indian religious reflection, the distinguished scholar, Sasibhusan Dasgupta divided religious thought into two fundamental strands: both these strands could be said to have searched for ways of bringing dharmic purity to peoples' lives, but in very different senses.[1] The first saw the essence of a religious life in ceremonials, rituals and sacrifices (*yagna*) or what could be called its ***karmakanda***; the second, by contrast, followed an anti-ritualistic meaning of religious life, and saw its centre in spiritual discipline (*sadhana*). Dasgupta's suggestion is rather cryptic: beyond making the proposal for this distinction he does not elaborate the implication of this idea fully. But it is possible to gloss this distinction and arrive at an important distinction between

two ways of interpreting a religious/dharmic good life. The first view acknowledges the necessary entanglement of ordinary people in mundane interests, and the compulsion to act in self-centred ways that this immersion forces upon them: observance of religious rituals is purifying in the sense that it counteracts the effects of these repetitive acts of self-orientation, and connects the actor with a transcendent dimension by reminding him of its existence, and in a sense seeking forgiveness for engaging in those acts. But this demand for a religious life does not demand of ordinary people to act in a way that is unworldly, or contrary. Primarily, it does not demand a reflection and purification of the everyday self. This *marga* does not demand any *sadhana*, and even if it is ennobled by the term *sadhana*, it is certainly not an *ulta-sadhan*, a practice that is contrary to the demands of everyday social life. The second line of reasoning about what a life of dharma means leads in a very different direction. On this view, the primary goal of religious life is a slow perfection of the self, to cultivate an ability to live according to rules which are quite different from the ordinary demands of household life. This line of religious thought ultimately centred on a question which, I think, remains quite fundamental to concerns of modern radicalism.

Dasgupta's suggestion, implicitly shared by a large number of twentieth century interpreters of religion, was that although the doctrinal beliefs accompanying the *sadhana* practices of different sects, cults and traditions often differed widely, in essence, all *sadhanas* (i.e., all variants of the second mode of religious life) should be characterized as '*ulta*-sadhan', i.e., a contrarian practice. All *sadhanas* urged its practitioners to try 'to swim against the currents of worldly aspirations', or to follow another recurrent metaphor, to try to go upstream when the trend of worldly affairs is *nimnaga* – pulling downstream, morally downwards. Interestingly, though Dasgupta's treatment is indifferent to Islamic thought, it can be easily expanded to include central reflections of Sufi Islam as well.[2] Briefly, this means that traditional religious thought recognized that

every society exerts Durkheimian pressures on its inhabitants to conform to certain demands of worldly practice – to gain success, to collect wealth, to ingratiate oneself to political power, to get precedence and prestige over others. In other words, societies have *structures*, and they force individual conduct into particular forms, shapes and directions. *Sadhana* – the essence of religious life and its discipline – consists of a sustained and practiced ability to act against these structural pressures towards locally defined worldly success, and to act, at the risk of appearing silly or insane, or indifferent to the welfare of one's family, against the insistence and intensity of this social gravitation. Dasgupta was right in claiming, through a wide-ranging discussion of religious thought – from the ancient Upanishads to relatively late medieval Bengali *Nathapanthi* sects – that all these trends saw *sadhana* by definition as *ulta-sadhan* – the practice of a morally inspired non-conformity against the weight of social norms, not doing what the surrounding society demanded of individuals. Religious life in the true sense, seen as *sadhana* not as *acara*, is therefore always hard, difficult to achieve. Surrounding society always derides the *sadhaka* as a fool until it is forced to treat him as a saint. Real religious life therefore always requires great moral courage, a form of ethical contrariety – not in the ordinary sense of being able to undertake the morally correct acts, but to face the derision of society as a failure, a good-for-nothing.[3]

On reflection we can recognize in this a *general* challenge in social life, not only in pre-modern religious practice. To put it in a different way, religious traditions thought deeply and persistently about social evils through this particular route; and these forms of religion, not surprisingly, share interesting features with modern traditions of radicalism. My sense is that Marxist radicalism faces in an acute form a secularized version of this test; and a great deal of the failure of Marxist radicalism comes from its inability to get to the heart of this problem, even to see it with sufficient clarity as a problem that is central to its own life. As Marxists never saw this

question clearly, it is not surprising that they were not able to offer serious solutions to it in real life.

In what sense could this be a general problem, rather than a specific religious one? Is there a clear enough sense in which we all face this test, not just religious *sadhakas*? In Marx's works we clearly encounter a dual argument about the rise of the capitalist society in the modern West and the challenges of a thinking person's life inside it. Marxism offered both a powerful and irrefutable historical sociology – an accurate description of the functioning of this new society, and at the same time it interpreted this society as being based on 'wrong' ethical principles in the sense that these were in some deep sense 'unnatural' and degrading to human beings who must act in particular roles/ways to reproduce its structures.[4] If Marxism had been only an historical sociology, this question would not have arisen; but because it constantly intertwines ethical judgements with its description of patterns of social facts, it makes this question – which is identical to that of a truly religious life – unavoidable. Its economic logic makes the capitalist economy a society which relentlessly produces social inequality at every level – not just in aggregate terms between social classes, but also between atomistic individuals, forcing them into 'a war of all against all'. Marx's more ethically explicit reflections, particularly in his early writings, view this insistent production of inequality as creating varying forms of degradation at divergent levels of capitalist society. This tendency towards an ethical naturalization of capitalist behavior was captured with exemplary force two centuries before Marx: in a capitalist culture, "constantly to be outgone is misery, constantly to outgo the next before is felicity, and to forsake the course is to die".[5]

Seen in this way, there is a structure of ethical conduct which affects both religious and secular lives. By his continuing stress against a wan intellectualization of his radical ideas, Marx repeatedly exhorts his readers to understand *the demands of practice*. From the last injunction in the theses on Feuerbach, that the point is to

change the world, and not to interpret the world radically, Marx continually stresses this idea; and he shows a clear awareness of a peculiar danger that his new kind of radicalism is prone to: a danger of intellectualization, a retreat from practice to discourse, from making a real difference in life to merely making noise. Intellectuals might take over his radicalism by claiming that what was important was to elaborate intellectual and explanatory ideas about the structure of the capitalist economy and its degrading effects. But that would leave the world as they found it. Capitalism, like any stable social structure, is entirely capable of weathering verbal storms. I think we can see this aspect of Marx's thought as making a point and a demand that is parallel to forms of religious thinking. Ancient Indian religious philosophers came to stress that a really good life – a religious life in the true sense – cannot be one which simply observed ritualistic observances with punctiliousness: it must consist in a life of *atma-saksatkara* – an encounter with oneself, gaining a true understanding of one's own acts. An individual must attain an awareness that he is – potentially Siva, the perfect being – himself: but this potential has to be realized by attentive directed acts of everyday life. Periodically, an individual must strive to 'meet himself' – to get an accurate understanding of his own level of attainment in this ethical path. Islamic doctrines of the self are full of similar advice: that being a true Muslim does not consist in outwards rituals or regular prayers, and visits to mosques and shrines, but in an attentive perfection of the self's ethical capacity – the ability, in the face of worldly demands, to act well, and to construct a good life brick by brick. In the constant argument by Marxist philosophers it seems that they were also clear that there was a similar danger of an intellectualized reversal of the radical promise of social action: that modern radicalism must guard against a retreat of this powerful impulse into a mere intellectual doctrine, in which case, its equivalent to religious ritualization would be the ritualization of ideology, when the vivid ability to scrutinize one's own acts is replaced by the passive

obedience to ideological positions – which, in its turn, would bring the return of official approval and applause. Radicals are caught in a situation that parallels in some ways the structure of the religious dilemma. Domesticity imposes a structure on human lives, and religious individuals had on one side to respond minimally to its demands, yet try to live according to 'contrary' principles. Radical individuals in a capitalist society have, from this angle, the same problem – to live in a society in which 'living well' according to its naturalized ethics consists in developing high skills in 'outgoing the next before', but finding a way of living a life that does not surrender to demands of inegalitarian practice. On this view, every act in their own lives should be scrutinized by radical individuals to check if they have acted in ways that are contrary to the self-interest-maximizing ethics of capitalist society.[6] Otherwise, individuals can follow two other options, which are both comparable to a surrender to ritualistic forms of religious life. The first is to turn the test of radicalism into a verbal-discursive one: to turn one's radicalism into a primarily declamatory (in speech or writing) rather than 'practical' exercise. Or, it can turn into following some external authority like a party organization. Radicalism would not lie in the quality of the acts that form a life – but either pronouncements unsupported by practice, or an external obedience to an authority in a way exactly similar to ritualistic religiosity. Not to see this central choice in radical politics would turn it into a 'ritualistic' form of life. This is how life went out of Communist practice in Soviet-style systems, and I suppose also in our own context, in the blind submission to ideological stances emerging from party bureaucracies entirely addicted to electoral power. This is a rather recondite way of connecting central concerns in the Kathamrita to our more secular and political concerns. But I think it also shows that there is a fairly simple similarity of concern about how to live contrarily in a society with whose principles we disagree, but which we nonetheless have to live inside. Disciples and admirers of Ramakrishna, I think, struggled in their own practice

with a similar dilemma about modernity: how to live in modernity without submitting to some of its fundamental 'naturalized' ethical and cognitive demands. Given their dedication to Westernist terminology, Indian Marxists might find it hard to accept this; but I think there is an ethical injunction at the heart of the theory they claim to hold dear that instructs them to practice ulta-sadhan against a society increasingly dominated by the naturalized ethics of modern capitalism. So the Kathamrita can offer even radicals something of continuing value. It is a strange parallel. Admirers of Ramakrishna had to live against the current in the intellectual culture of their age, defying the insistent intellectual norms of emerging modernity. Radicals too have to go against the current of the normalized individualistic ethics of a rising capitalist economy. Both sides have to figure out the meaning and value of a life of true non-conformity.

That however does not take away the force of my initial concern: the *external* relation I have with a text like the Kathamrita. It makes sense then to start from the most external features of the text.

Some textual features: what kind of text is the *Kathamrita*? Who is its author?

What kind of text is the Kathamrita? So that we can begin to decide what is the appropriate way of reading it? One of the primary responsibilities of reading a text is to make a distinction between a *text* and a *book*. The text is a much wider term than a book. The Sanskrit term *grantha* (from the verb *granth* – tying, binding, stringing together, to stitch/connect) bears a close resemblance to the exact meaning of the Greek-derived English term – which indicates a primal activity – of weaving, or connecting words together. This is an activity which is much more primary compared to the far more elaborate, and in that sense secondary, activity of writing a book. A text is something which puts words together – which does not necessarily mean that it is a book in the taken for granted modern sense. Books are always texts, but all texts are not books. Texts are,

in this sense, a much larger set of which books form a subset.

Simply, in modern cultures, a book is a combination of an authorial intention and expressivity: an individual intends to express, externalize, and objectify some ideas of his own. And the book is the material form in which these things exist in the world. Ordinarily, the texts we read do not force us to think about the most fundamental relation sitting within language – between the two radically different modes, as Derrida showed clearly, in which language exists. Although religious readers of the text probably do not directly think about these complexities behind its deceptive simple presentation: this raises not merely fundamental questions about what kind of text it exactly is; it also excites us to think about other deeper questions about the nature of language itself and its various modes of existence and capacities for communication.

Writing: the making of the text

Texts exist between writing and reading: to understand a text is to analyze the specific activities of writing and reading of a text. But *what* is the Kathamrita? It is emphatically not a book, or at least what we are used to thinking of as a book in the context of modern cultures. It is clearly not written like an ordinary book. A book, in the standard modern sense, bears a simple, fairly straightforward relation to an authorial personality and his intention to express meaningful ideas. There is no disjunction between the expressive intention of the author and writing of the textual sentences. The author is unambiguously the maker of the text. The moment we put this picture of what a book is in place, the Kathamrita starts defying these criteria, and starts growing strange. The Kathamrita is a standing refutation of this model: simply because the writing, and the distinct intention that goes with it, is entirely disjuncted from the expression of the ideas that make it valuable. The ideas it expresses are from one person, the writing by another. So the intention, and expressivity, which are assumed to be conjoined in a

book, are radically separated, and then recombined in a text which is therefore radically different from other texts we commonly read. To read the Kathamrita as a book is an immense mistake: it is a failure of slow and critical reading; because the task of slow reading is first to judge what we are to read, before starting to read it. Because how we read, what strategies we adopt in comprehending a text depends on the kind of text it is. At one level, of course M. is the author as he is incontrovertibly the writer of the sentences: yet, he adopts in his writing a stance very similar to the writers of medieval saintly biographies: of texts like the *Fawaid al Fuad* in which Ali Hassan Sijzi Dehlavi recorded Nizam ad-din Awliya's conversations,[7] or the *Caitanyacaritamrta* by Krishnadas Kaviraj about Caitanya. There is no doubt that the Kathamrita belongs, incongruously in modern culture, to a genre which has been obliterated by modern developments of religiosity. This precisely makes it possible to understand certain features of Ramakrishna's thought. Ramakrishna is a wall of negation/resistance against the storm of modernity – of its ability to uproot and blow away everything in religious thought. And it is entirely appropriate that a work/book in which his thinking is to be enshrined forces its very modern author to imitate an entirely pre-modern textual form.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that it is the writing down of the ideas of a man who is in principle opposed to writing and what it does to the human intellect. Much of Ramakrishna's discourse implies that writing and the learnedness associated with it deprives the intellect or the intellectual act of its fluency, its accidental quality, its transience, its innate mortality and modesty.

The title of the work partly captures this fascinating operation on its constituent ideas: although in print, it purports to be, and offers itself as *katha* – words. The term *katha* in Bengali resembles the many-sidedness of the English word: it can mean *a* word, or word *in general* from its Sanskrit associations it could also suggest a story, narrative of some kind. All these meanings are suggested in

the *katha* of *Kathamrita*: it is Ramakrishna's *katha*, it is *katha* about Ramakrishna, it is the word, because these *katha* are the only *kathas* worth listening to. But in all this the title is entirely silent about the writing, the writing seeks to hide the fact of writing, obliterate its trace altogether: it is the *amrta* of Ramakrishna's *katha* which is being offered, not a refracting writing by some other, less divine author. This in a sense is the most interesting and paradoxical feature of the text: Ramakrishna's speech-based thought could not have survived without M.'s writing, and meticulous recording. Yet, in a sense the act of writing is a dual act – an act, on the one hand of intense and indivisible loyalty to the master, but in another a strange betrayal, a refusal to allow his ideas to stay in the way he expressed it, a decision, which future generations can only wonder about, not to let it live and die as speech. Lives of great saints were preserved in two different forms of memory. Though both deserved to be called memory, the actual operation of remembering functioned differently in these two cases. In pre-modern preservation of the past, lives of saints were conserved through a memory of their acts usually uninterpreted by accompanying words. In this sense, these lives and their inspiring power was similar to the imaginative force of great narrative figures – like Ram or similar other exemplary narrative heroes. Popular memory had an immense interpretative liberty in 'reading' their silent lives. In cases where saints' discourses were recorded with some purported accuracy, memory worked quite differently – by recall, because there were literal words which were there to be re-read and re-presented in a pre-interpretive form. Writing the discourse down makes such literalism possible.

Reading: the taking of the text

Reading is a very general activity – which can fall into many different types: there are many kinds of reading, and these kinds are determined by what kind of things we are trying to read. Reading newspapers is not similar to reading literature; and reading textbooks is different from reading stories for entertainment. An obvious

difference exists between linear and circular readings; and such difference can appear within reading of what appears to be broadly the same kind of texts. Take the reading of literature. Reading a detective novel by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay and reading a poem by Sakti Chattopadhyay are both reading forms of literature: but, on reflection, the actual activity of reading the two texts is very different. We read detective stories in a linear fashion: we are driven by our curiosity to know what happened next, and eventually what occurs in the narrative puzzles around which such stories are constructed. What we read in poems are not linear results, but phrasal semantics; sometimes lines, ideas, metaphors which either make meaning without depending on the whole, or stop us by artistic surprise, making linearity inappropriate as a strategy of understanding. In some forms of poetry, written as songs, as in Tagore, there is a formal recognition of this circular expectation of reading embedded in the refrain, the repetition of the line which either inaugurates the poem, or where the textual artifice shows the primary semantic emphasis to be located. In some cases, even in apparently linear reflective writing of prose, we come across elements of circular reading: often there are sentences which contain ideas so arresting and in ways so vivid that we remember them even when the rest of essay fades from memory. We retain a memory of them in exactly the same way we remember lines from songs. Even if we take this simple division between a linear and a circular-repetitive way of reading, how would that apply to the *Kathamrita*?

Learnedness/Panditya

Why is this consideration significant for the Kathamrita? For the simple reason that it is a text extracted from a reluctant author. It is a book from(not by) an author who did not want to be one, drawn out of him, unwillingly, almost by a ruse; but it was also an entirely open ruse, always open for him to see, a ruse with which he went along. Sijzi notes in his work that after collating his notes for more

than a year, he informed Nizam ad-din Awliya of his efforts; and the saint not merely read his folio, but also assisted him by repetitions of what he had forgotten.[8] Evidently, even in premodern cultures, a potent tension existed between speaking and writing, often detected in the religious discourse about saints. Many religious figures clearly regarded writing and preservation of their words as hubris, and disavowed it. Nizam ad-din Awliya when told by someone that a person showed a book purportedly written by him, said: "He spoke a lie: I wrote no book." (FAF, 132) Yet, he confides to Sijzi that he himself thought he should collate the sayings of saint Fariduddin, his preceptor, and wrote them down. (FAF, 132) Ramakrishna was constantly discoursing against the new, modern intellectualism of the learned book. He realized of course that there was a long tradition of book-learning in his own Hindu tradition, of the pandit – which he constantly derided. He had the historical sight to see that this older tradition of learning was undermined by modernity, but replaced by a far more enchanting tradition of the same kind. In the very first lines of the text, M. asks an attendant about Ramakrishna:

...Ini ki khub bai-tai paden?

...Ar baba bai-tai! Sab ọnr mukhe!...

...Bai na padile ki manus mahat hoy?...[9]

[-Does he read a lot of books?
-Leave aside books. With him, everything is in what he says (literally, in his case, everything is from his lips).
-Can anyone achieve greatness without reading books?]

In purely textual terms, this is a very interesting set of sentences, particularly because of a lack of pause for the explicit change of voice. Unlike ordinary fiction, or ordinary documentary writing, this dispenses with the formal ascription of the voice: obliterating the difference between two people in an utterly casual conversation. Because of that erasure of voice, this becomes a strange witness to

the profoundest truth and tension in the work. Is it something that is all speech, or something that is all writing? How is it to be judged in a changing or already changed world which reserves greatness/ immortality to living through books. In two adjacent sentences this exchange captures the wonderful tension in the text – of a moral excellence based on reading and texts and a competing moral eminence based entirely on the simultaneous incandescence and impermanence of speech – through the telling contrast between *mukh* and *bai* – of language in its heavy, learned form of writing and language in its light, transient, vivacious, playful form of speaking. It states the contrast between the heavy responsibility implicit in writing, of taking one's thoughts sufficiently seriously to make them textual, writing as a waiting for the approach of the appropriate audience (*kalo hi ayam niravadhi, vipula ca prthvi*); and on the other hand, the casual, spontaneous comportment of speech, of expressing ideas without discrimination, aiming them at anyone who happens to be around. In that sense, there is a wonderful complexity that is integral to the *Kathamrita* – neither of the two voices can express itself properly without some reliance on the other, and each is to an extent disloyal to the other. For the earnest devotee, it is a tragic loss – of Ramakrishna's unmediated speech and presence; at the same time, it is the best substitute available, a device that saved those ideas from a deeper erasure. Ramakrishna's speech cannot come to us without M.'s writing: and M.'s writing cannot wipe out the evident fact that what we are witnessing is writing about speaking thought, that is why readers go to the text – with an impossible desire. We hope that M.'s writing would be sufficiently transparent to allow us to hear Ramakrishna speak, and not M. write: but it is always a speech betrayed by its capture in writing, and a writing which cannot fully capture the nature of speech. They accept the limitation they reciprocally place on each other: in modern times, in *kalikal*, this is the only ambiguous way this kind of religious thought can survive. M. and his idol therefore inhabited two sides

of a great historical divide about how religious intellectualism was to be practiced. Ramakrishna firmly inhabited the side of Nizam ad-din Awliya and Kabir – in fact, less Nizam ad-din Awliya than Kabir. But M. practiced an equally determined defiance of this mode of intellectual exchange – which is entirely adventitious, wasteful, of the moment; which does not gather and preserve, which believes in the unexhausted source of religious experience, and therefore disdains to record anything.

A second more general question arises about the turning of the *katha* into the work Kathamrita, because of Ramakrishna's explicit rejection of a mode of religious thought centred on the ideals of 'learning'. It is a book extracted from someone who mistrusted the book as an institution and viewed it as a source of learning and cause of unworthy pride. Two strands of criticism and rejection run through the discourses. First, among the well-known conventional paths to God – the Hindu *margas* – Ramakrishna continually shows his preference for bhakti over *jnana*, though some of his remarks about what the *jnana marga* involves are deeply revealing. He makes it explicitly clear that he considers the way of devotion easier to act upon, and therefore attainable, compared to the way of knowledge. However, the content of this way, which is generally associated with Shankara in the discourses, is termed *jnana*, and treated with deep respect. But this is quite different from another semantic sense in which the term jnana is used in colloquial modern Bengali, where it means 'learning', particularly book-learning in which modern Bengalis excelled, and by which, according to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, they wrested the leadership of modern India from its conventional, military leaders. Modern Bengali intellectuals had an acute sense of this collective gift – their ability to turn what was an essentially traditional brahminical skill into a potent weapon to conquer power in the modern institutional world – which conferred on the modern Bengali his pre-eminence in British India. Ramakrishna was a living rejection of this ideal of modern jnana, and his religious practice

relentlessly undermined book-knowledge as a misleading, deceptive form of 'knowing' – a knowing that is inert against contingencies, a learning that does not know what to do in demanding situations except to repeat an endless series of quotations. M. was a learned, Western-educated devotee, who despite his utter admiration was distanced fundamentally from Ramakrishna's thinking technique, and this difference is recorded at every step in the tone of the account itself, in its constant wonder at the possibility of what it is witnessing, its simultaneous registration of disbelief and belief. At the end of every recording of some striking conversation there is an unwritten exclamation: how is this possible in our times? In this M. is not alone: this wonder is regularly echoed by other devotees like Girish Ghosh. The relation between its two authors therefore is a relation of tension – of a book-learned, Western educated modernist man noting down in disbelieving admiration the wisdom of an un-book-learned pre-modern thinker – who is a thinker in a pure form, a kind of thinker that modernity abolishes entirely – a thinker who revels and finds himself only in thinking, and who is entirely unenticed by the insistent modern conversion of thinking into writing. One author – the more fundamental one – is in principle hostile to the very idea of writing. His words are literally words – like flowers or butterflies, like sparks, in Tagore's words, words whose joy was in a sudden ending after its brief incandescent life.[10] Ramakrishna's words are like sparks of light; they are not meant to continue. M. wants to capture them and light a lamp with them. In one sense nothing could be more appropriate than what he is doing; in another nothing less appropriate. Ramakrishna's whole existence was a contradiction: he was a pre-modern saint born and helplessly residing in a world turning rapidly and relentlessly modern. Kathamrita's secondary author – the author of its writing, who disavowed any ordinary claim to be the originator of these fascinating reflections – was equally convinced that these ideas should not be left to the fate of classical music performances – to be heard by the fortunate who

were close enough to hear them, but unrecorded for posterity. Earlier religious discourse was premised on several conditions: it assumed the continuing presence of the religious figure who teaches his audience of followers, and it simply presupposed a material structure of presence, in which devotees will return regularly to the teacher, and the teacher, therefore, can converse with them without a formal start or finish to the discourse. It is something quite like a lecture, but also something extremely unlike it. Unlike a lecture, it does not have a declared theme; and unlike a lecture, it is emphatically not prepared; and while Ramakrishna is an indefatigable discourser himself, we also notice his strong distaste for preaching and religious propaganda – an issue which is often discussed with his Brahmo admirers, especially in conversations between him and Keshab Chandra: *mahasay, pracar na hole loke janbe ki kore?* [Sir, how would people know, if there is no preaching?] It is very interesting to compare for their purely formal properties the discourses of Ramakrishna with those of the Brahmo figures like Sibnath Sastri whose sermons have been recorded and preserved as published texts. To return to the relation between speaking and writing: Brahmo sermons exhibit the clear mark of modernity by showing how under conditions of modern intellectual life, speaking itself is transformed to imitate writing – by becoming more studied, systematic, becoming in a sense a mere preparation for written language.

The languages of the text

Sanskrt kupa-jal Kabira/ bhasa bahta nir/
jab cahon taba-hi dubon/ santa hoya sarir [11]

Appropriately, for a text of such misleading simplicity, the language of the text is a *question*, rather than a fact. Many signs indicate that M., its secondary author, engages in serious reflection about the problematic nature of his project – and what linguistic registers he could use. A first sign is the use of the word *katha* in the title. In English, a precise capture of the sense of *katha* in the title would be

Word, in its elevated sense, not words; because it is the Word which is expressed through the spoken words. Yet, Ramakrishna Kathamrita's discourses scrupulously avoid a high literary style and embrace the unthreaticality of everyday speech. Ramakrishna's speech is nothing if not everyday – utterly devoid of external, literary embellishments, capturing his audience's attention not by what the words do in a literary way, but by what they point to. M. is a canny presenter: he acknowledges the many discrepancies and externalities that intrude into the primal word that he is trying to present to his reader; that is why I suppose he chooses the term *katha*, which is not used with the other meaning of narrative, which, by this time, was becoming obsolete.[12] In his many conversations with Brahmos, Ramakrishna reflects on the many ways in which the word of God could be delivered to ordinary human beings. Almost always he rebukes the Brahmos, including close associates like Keshab Chandra, that *pracar* – publicity – was not the right way of bearing witness to the presence of God in this world. Ramakrishna's conversations do not bear the character of sermons, the preferred form of delivery of the Brahmos, which require a highly formalistic, Western-style setting, a *staging* of the name of God. It seems that Ramakrishna has a deep rejection of precisely this act of staging, because it separates out a sphere, a special physical space, a special but restricted time for the remembrance of God. Ramakrishna avoids this modern distinction between the sacred and the profane. In contrast, he has a sense of the sacred and the profane being held together in a relation of inextricability; and the mundane can always be surprised by an irruption of the divine. The elaborate staging and organization of modernist religious life for him is an attempt to control the presence of the divine, to capture it in the confines of a schedule, a form of conceit. For him, divinity accompanies daily life and remains inextricable from its acts, or at times it comes to him as an irresistible external force, like his trances, over which he had no control. In a strict sense, he did not have the trances; they came upon him. M.'s writing strives to attain a form

of presentation which avoids writing and writtenness, and prizes and preserves its character as *kathal* speech. Thus reflection on the textuality of the Kathamrita takes us to the heart of a fundamental question about language and its modes of existence – its existence as speech and as writing. Derrida's exploration has made us much more sensitive to this difference within the interior of language itself. Speech is fluid, instantaneous, transient, vulnerable, incorrigible; writing strives to the opposite – it is fixed, permanent, immutable, corrigible, solid. Above all, speech is like a performance: speaking is more like dancing or singing: once a step is taken, there is no room to erase it and to insert a correct or better step in its place, or to improve a note that is already sung. Speech is subject to the awareness of its own imperfection, and therefore, the necessity of returning to itself, and presenting something better. Repetition is central to speech, because of this reason; while it is a sin in written language. The *Kathamrita* captures these features, because M. does not edit or erase the repetition of the same story, or of an identical metaphor. Every practical act consists of striving, writing or drawing and rubbing it off and rewriting, doing better in the second time what the first attempt could not fully attain. Underlying Ramakrishna's teaching is a sense that ethical life – the attempt to lead a good life is precisely like that, a striving that is never perfect, and therefore never to be left in a final state. Some of Tagore's songs contain echoes of similar thoughts – as in the lucid but strange line: *majhe majhe taba dekha pai, ciradin kena pai na* [why can I get a glimpse of you at times, but it does not stay with me always?] Thus there is a deep connection between what Ramakrishna considers the intrinsic nature of a life of religious quest and its expression through *kathal* speech. Speech is not propositional: it continues – even in an individual's life, speech is never begun, and never ended. It simply does not have the form of finality of a written argument consisting of propositions which must have a beginning and an end: without that a piece of writing fails to attain what it seeks. Strangely, it

could be said, by contrast, that speech, if it begins or ends, would simply falsely mimic writing: it would simply fail to be what it is. These are two ways doing things with ideas; and Ramakrishna is an unqualified partisan of speech. He abandons all the structures of learning, because these lack the inwardness, the internally directed character of speech. Interestingly, in many religious expressions, for instance in Kabir, we come across a strange group of sayings which are addressed inwardly, *to the self*, not signed as *'kahata kabira suno bhai sadho'*, but often like 'sanskrt kupajal kabira bhasa bahta nir', where the line is addressed not to outsiders but to the listener inside. This is the nature of Ramakrishna's Word; and the Kathamrita shows an awareness of the difference by its two registers of prose.

In the writing of the text there is much observable heterogeneity: all the writing in the Kathamrita is not of the same kind, or for the same purpose. M.'s own narrative writing bears a mild solemnity; a lot of descriptive writing captures the natural setting – the tides on the river, the changing lights under the dense foliage in the garden at different times of the day, the sense of expectant auspiciousness on days of festivities. This function is performed in a formal high Sanskritic language. Depiction of the surrounding characters uses a lighter language which is also used for closely observed description of the conduct of the main characters of his drama. Ramakrishna is rarely observed externally in this sense: what M. tries to report is his speech; and this is offered in their artlessness. The heavier Sanskritic register M. uses for description or atmospherics works like a heavily ornate frame for a picture that depicts a painterly object with masterful simplicity.

Mediation and Immediacy of God's Presence

The nineteenth century was the period of the entry of the Western modern in Bengali cultural life. A crucial element in this change was the introduction of entirely new 'rationalistic' ideas which caused unprecedented changes in the way people thought about the world

and their place in it. The intellectual transformation of modernity was comprehensive and many-sided. It changed the fundamental ways in which people thought about the natural and social world – about the economy, the state, social institutions. Rationalistic questioning of religious beliefs and the response of religious thought to this unprecedented form of skepticism constituted a central part of this intellectual drama. In fact, both sides in this exchange were crucial for the subsequent history of India – both the rationalistic skepticism and its gradual intensification; and on the other hand, the ingenuity with which Bengali thinkers defended religious faith. To understand Bengali modernity, therefore, it is essential to chart the changing geometry of religious positions of this epoch. It is obvious that what happened in Bengal was nothing like a simple movement from superstitious belief to rationalist 'disenchantment'. Rather, what happened was an intellectual process in which religious thinkers offered deeply reflective responses to the skeptical view. But I wish to suggest that even in that great churning of religious and rationalistic ideas, Ramakrishna had an irreducible distinctiveness – which set him apart from all others, including his own followers. Ramakrishna was unique and without an exemplar in his times, and without a successor. Even Vivekananda, his greatest and closest disciple, in my judgment, fashioned a religious position that was fundamentally different. In religious life, Ramakrishna was the last medieval thinker.

Nothing had happened in Bengali history since Caitanya's revolutionary teachings remotely like the crisis in religious thinking in the 19th century. As Charles Taylor has pointed out in his study of Western secularization, the rise and growth of modern science forced upon modern people an acceptance of what he calls an 'immanent frame'.[13] Against Weber's hasty generalization that acceptance of the immanent frame necessarily leads to 'disenchantment'[14] and a growing unbelief in the existence of God, Taylor argues that even after an acceptance of the immanent frame, the choice of belief or

disbelief remains an open question. This, to my mind, is a crucial insight which makes it possible to understand and explain what happens in religious life in Bengal, which standard versions of Weberian sociology would simply not be able to handle. Acceptance of scientific explanations of natural laws of increasing complexity has an immediate bearing on peoples' conception of God. As science comes to explain the immense complexity of the natural universe, it forces a change in the way people conceived of God. It turns into a picture of a hidden and distant God who is the possible artificer of nature's infinite mechanism but who does not have to be present in it for its standard functioning. Bankim Chandra captured this with characteristic wit – God does not run the universe the way a coachman runs his carriage on a Calcutta street. He has created this vast apparatus, animated it with its precise mechanisms, and left it to work by itself – through mysterious laws which it is the task of the human mind to decipher. This distancing of God, his disappearance from the immediate workings of the natural universe, slowly becomes a fundamental tenet of modern belief, and strikingly, despite their major differences, nearly all strands of modern Bengali thinking assented to that implicit conviction. In a rather different way, Bhudev Mukhopdhyay, another remarkable religious thinker, defending a more conservative form of Brahminical Hinduism, claimed that God created a world ruled by invariable rules of causality. Causality governed the functioning of the natural universe, and through the rule of *karma*, the occurrences of individual human lives. Once this universe was created, God retreated from active interference in its functioning. It was a mistake, thought Bhudev, to attribute human qualities to God; because he was beyond ordinary states of being pleased or displeased. Though the religious doctrines he defended were quite different from those of Bankim or the Brahmos, Bhudev also believed in a distant God, withdrawn from the universe. Acceptance of the world-picture of modern science is more obvious in case of the Brahmos. Though Brahmo religious thought and

practice developed several strands and eventually fragmented, all tendencies believed in the picture of a distant, hidden God. God's omnipresence was translated by figures like Rabindranath Tagore into a latent presence inside the human heart.[15] His poetry also found a miraculous way of melding a mundane wonder at the infinity of the universe with an epiphanic sense of God's creativity.[16]

But it is this emerging unanimity around various forms of 'providential deism', an intellectual unanimity about a distant God, that Ramakrishna's religious practice defied. On several fronts, the conception of God in Bengali culture undergoes an irreversible change. Although several nineteenth century writers persisted in defending the idea that this distant God could still be conceived in traditional deities like Krishna, a subtle sense of dissonance emerges between those images of intimacy and the new idea of God as the creator of the immense nature revealed by modern science. It becomes more appropriate to think of him as formless, *nirakar*, a sense captured artistically in many of Tagore's Puja songs.[17] Against this strengthening force of thinking, stands Ramakrishna's undiminished belief in God in the image of Kali, who must appear to her devotee if he is genuinely plagued by a metaphysical anxiety (*vyakulata*). This unshakable belief made him simultaneously intriguing to two sets of the well-educated modernist intelligentsia. While a section of this elite ignored him as a recidivist figure, out of place in the modern world, another group regarded him with fascination as a figure of heroic resistance to modernity – something they admired but could not replicate. Yet an interesting feature of his rejection of modern modes of prayer was his astonishing absence of hostility. Unlike more ideological critics of modernity, he did not denigrate science, or discourse about its impending dissolution of morals. This absence of stridency was seen by many of his admirers as extraordinary – a strange metaphysical calm in the face of historical change, an assurance of the truth of his God, unperturbed by the collapse of traditional culture. There was something heroic in his

singularity – which his Barhmo and other modern followers regarded with incredulous admiration.

Can there be Avataras in modern times?

Wonder at the very possibility of the existence of such a figure is expressed in the endless repetition of the question: can there be avataras in modern times? And by implication, was Ramakrishna an avatara? This question comes up repeatedly in the *Kathamrita*; and it is interesting to see the ground of this question. It stems from a deep conviction among the religious that all that was common, almost immutable in the past have become impossible under modern conditions. Obviously, the question arose from a background of deep skepticism fostered by modern knowledge. And in some instances, the question is directed at Ramakrishna himself. To this Ramakrishna's answer is equally important and uncompromising: God in a sense exists beyond time, why should she not be able to do now what she could before? Why should man's modernity abrogate God's eternal nature? But his admirers and devotees remain troubled by doubt till the end, shown by the persistent interrogative form of nearly all of M.'s reflections on possibility of an avatara in the nineteenth century.

In the newly skeptical intellectual milieu of early modern Bengal, the avatara question formed a part of a larger unease. Even after the scientific picture of the world was accepted, where could a presence of God fit into it. It is possible to sense a deep and widespread yearning for even the distant God not to leave the world, to turn his back on it altogether, though many believers would refuse to accept avatara status for contemporary religious figures. We can see a different answer, animated by a different conviction from a very intense religious mind – just a few years later, troubled by the doubt about the presence of God in the world, in Tagore's famous poem, significantly titled 'Prasna' (question):

Bhagaban tumi juge juge dut pathayecho bare bare
Dayahin samsare.

Tagore had quite a different sense of our times from Ramakrishna: the evils that troubled Tagore and urged him to ask for God's presence were mainly social and political tribulations of modernity, not just the personal troubles of leading a good life. For Tagore, the good life for which humans should strive had a more expanded definition. The reassurance of God's presence is correspondingly more ambiguous and fretful. It is infused with a dark foreboding that avataras would be defeated by modern evil in pre-modern times, conquerors may have slain people in their thousands, and refused God's injunction of compassion, but they simply lacked the capacity for what Tagore captures in two tellingly dark phrases – poisoning God's gift of the very air, and extinguishing his gift of light itself from his created world (*je jan tomar bishaiche vayu, nibhaiche taba alo)*. The difference between the two visions is striking. The presence of his God is not a question. Ramakrishna was an amazing figure who lived in modern times like a pre-modern man; we could almost say that he created a circle of pre-modern time within the modern age, through his ploy of powerful, irrefutable ignorance of the news of the modern world, so that in his personal life, and in his almost personal time, the performances of a pre-modern saintliness could still function unimpaired. Vivekananda, his pre-eminent follower, is a great repudiation of the pre-modern saint, refusing to live in this artificially created pre-modern circle of time itself. He broke out of that sweetly obsolete time into the time of modern evil he shared with Tagore – a world of colonialism, domination, wars, immense injustice and also a world swept by the storms of emancipatory desires of the wretched of the earth. Despite his life of connection with others, the throngs of pilgrims who came to Dakshineshwar in part to visit the Kali temple, but in part to watch the marvel of his life – the happening of the unmodern inside the modern, despite the great fascination he exercised on the minds of presumptuous

English-educated intellectuals, despite his intense relationship with a few devotees who understood him more than others, Ramakrishna accepted the subtle unconnectedness of the *avatara* in the wrong time, a deep unbreachable loneliness stemming from a defiance of history. In the fallen modern times, the avatara seemed to have lost the power to lead, to move others to emulate his conduct, but only to show to an increasingly disbelieving audience, the fading possibility of an inimitable saintliness.

A telling feature of Tagore's intense, troubled poem is that it ends with a luminous sentence in the shape of a question – 'tumi ki tader ksama kariacha, tumi ki besecho bhalo?' [have you given them forgiveness, have you given them love?] by the great master of the interrogative form – which throws a question at God himself. Ramakrishna is entirely certain that the ordinary prostitute is Kali herself, the mother in a fallen form. And it is interesting that his mind protects him from the kind of questions that troubled and ripped apart the tranquility of Tagore's world.

Ramakrishna is entirely untroubled by modernity, because he refuses it in a most fundamental sense, even more radical than Tagore or Gandhi. He lived his life as if modernity simply had not happened, as if this time was like any other time, completely unmoved by its peremptory cognitive demands. Tagore lived emphatically in modernity, as in a very different way did Gandhi: in the religiosity crafted by both of them, modernity set the questions to which they provided answers, and they, consequently, had a much more troubled relation with their time and its constituent experiences – war, colonialism, a dark march of apocalyptic crimes.

Quite apart from the questions of faith, and the function of religion, a reading of the Kathamrita with some historical sensibility – which allows the past its radical difference, and yet tries to guess, across temporal boundaries, what it could be to live in that time – shows us a point in historical time where some fundamental things

in Bengali intellectual culture changed irreversibly. It captures irreversible changes in two fields – in the way people think about morals or the good life, and, secondly, the way people use ideas and language, especially the radical transformation in the relation between the two sides of language – speech and writing. We can see how Bengali culture comes out of a world of speech to a world primarily of writing, and we can see how Ramakrishna sides both tragically and triumphantly with the speech cultures of the slowly passing past. He triumphs because he had the astonishing personality to make the entire modern, writing-driven culture come to him, and observe him in wonder. But his performance was also tragic: because the world of speech could not win over the modern world of writing by virtue of this single astonishing performance. In many different ways he was the last representative of a vanishing world of the pre-modern. Such periods are marked usually by deep tensions, and bitter polemics. But he was marked by a strange calm and an utter lack of embarrassment. In him this old world dies an utterly peaceful death – without any sense of resentment against history, against the visibly inevitable obsolescence of his way of life, against the impending death of his form of religion – an amazingly prescient mixture of defiance and acceptance of the historical emergence of the modern. The Kathamrita is thus an everlasting reminder of that past world, of a world we have everlastingly lost.

Notes and References

1 Shashibhushan Dasgupta, *Ghare-Bairer Sahitya Chinta*, Sahitya Jagat: Kalikata, 1962

2 Resemblance between Hindu practices and Sufi thought gets a brief and late mention in Dasgupta's essay; but this can be because of his lesser familiarity with Islamic traditions.

3 It is interesting to note that in his early life Ramakrishna faced this charge continually, even from people deeply affectionate towards him, like his elder brother, Ramkumar. See Isherwood.

[4] The question of unfulfilment permeates Marx's writings in all periods; but it is expressed with particular sharpness in his early writings, *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

[5] Thomas Hobbes, "Of the passions of the mind", *The Elements of Law*, Chapter IX

[6] There is a beautiful poetic rendering of this kind of life in a poem by Tagore:

Jaha hate pai chadineko bhai chadi ne/tai bale kichhu kada-kadi kore kadi ne

[7] Nizam ad-din Awliya, *Morals for the Heart, conversations of Shaykh Nizam ad-din Awliya recorded by Amir Hasan Sijzi*, translated by Bruce Lawrence, Paulist Press, New York, 1992

[8] Ibid., p. 112

[9] Sri M., *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, Complete Edition, Ananda Publishers: Kolkata, 1990, p. 14

[10] *Sphulinga tar pakhay pelo kshanakaler chhanda*
Hariye giye phuriye jabe ei tar-i ananda.

[11] Ksitimohan Sen, *Kabir*, [1910], Ananda Publishers: Kolkata, 2010, Bhumika

[12] The meaning of *katha* in for example *Kathasaritsagara* was already rare by the time Kathamrita was written; though Tagore used that word in his title for a book of narrative poems: *Katha O Kahini*.

[13] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, 2007

[14] A crucial problem in the academic literature on secularization is the combination of comprehensiveness and indeterminacy in the exact meaning of this word – how much does it include? Can disenchantment be sketchy or partial? I.e., could people accept some elements of disenchantment, and not others?

[15] This idea is quite endemic in Tagore's religious reflections. To pick up two examples at random from his songs:

Nayana tomare pay na dekhite, royecho nayane nayane/ hrday tomare pay na janite, royecho hrdaye gopane; or *ke go antaratara se*. – 'Puja', *Gitabitan*, Volume 1, songs 487, 525

[16] *Akas-bhara surya-tara visva-bhara pran/tahari majh khane ami peyechi more sthan/vismaye tai jage amar gan*, Prakriti, *Gitabitan*, Volume 2, song 8

[17] Think for instance of the prayers in *Bahe nirantara ananta ananda dhara* or *Maharaja eki saje ele hrdaya-pura-majhe*.

The Kathamrita: a Text for All Contexts

M. Sivaramkrishna

I

A direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna summed up his enormous significance thus:

> Sri Ramakrishna embodies an ideal for everyone. He was an ideal householder, an ideal guru and an ideal disciple. Moreover, his life can serve as an example for all faiths and all sects. He is an ideal for the worshippers of *Shakti*, as he practised and attained perfection in all important Tantric sadhanas. He is an ideal for Vaishnavites, for his devotion to Hari is unparalleled. He is also an ideal for the Shaivites as he attained the vision of Lord Shiva, too. He is an ideal for the devotees of Ramachandra, for he saw Rama and Sita. He is an ideal for the Vedantins as well, having experienced Nirvikalpa Samadhi, the culmination of the Vedantic sadhana, within three days. He is also an ideal for Christians and Mohammedans, because he had a vision of Christ and also of the Prophet.[1]

This comprehensive account is all the more amazing because it came from the "unlettered" Adbhutananda, a servant in his earlier life, but who, as the Great Master's Divine Play designed, became one of his most dedicated disciples. He is indeed an *Adbhuta*, a Great Wonder who upheld the truth that secular education and awareness of spiritual matters are not two different things!

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'Wonder', in fact, is the experience of many who saw Sri Ramakrishna. M. himself in the very first glimpse exclaims: "how wonderful!" What a "wonderful man!" In Bengali, the word is "*sundar*". I suppose it suggests "beautiful". "*Sundar manush*", "*sundar katha*" exclaims M. Moreover, M.'s intuitive sharpness makes him describe the phenomenon as *sarva teertha samagama*: the confluence of all pilgrim centers. One can also add *sarva siddhanta samarasya*: the dynamic convergence of *all* points of view.

Kathamrita, naturally, is a text for *all* contexts. The entire spectrum of our lives' contexts figure in that marvelous text. *Amrita*, nectar is a very significant clue. The English text, *The Gospel* came at a time when the world was caught in the holocaust of the Second World War. When the churning of contending powers left a trail of destruction unprecedented in human history. The reality of nuclear power changed the very concept and contours of war as no longer local but global. The year 1942 saw the appearance of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Out of the churning, the apocalyptic struggle, of gods and demons came *amrita*. The English *Kathamrita* heralded its advent in the far off New York city. Perhaps, it is also possible to find an analogy from the past: out of the Kurukshetra War came the *Bhagavadgita* of Sri Krishna; in the midst of the Second World War came the English *Kathamrita* of Sri Ramakrishna and the war *is* the Play of the Mother of the Great Master; in fact, the Mother of all. There is a song in *The Gospel* which evokes the eternal struggle at the heart of Nature. It is sung, ironically, in the midst of the festival at Panihati:

> Who is the Woman yonder who lights the field of battle?
> Darker her body gleams even than the darkest cloud,
> And from her teeth there flash the lightening blinding flames!
> Disheveled Her hair is flying behind as She rushes about,
> Undaunted in the war between gods and demons
> Laughing Her terrible laugh, She slays the fleeing asuras,
> And with Her dazzling flashes, She bares the horror of war.[2]

At the end of the song comes the revelation: "She is none other than Kali, Mother of all the worlds." The Great Mother's child "was in deep Samadhi"!

It is in the context of colossal struggle for Power – *Shakti* in varied forms – that, time-wise, *The Gospel* made its appearance.

II

The War posed contexts of formidable questions about the very meaning and significance of life. Heinrich Zimmer articulates these questions in the remarkable coincidence of the context of Sri Ramakrishna's Birthday celebrations in the very year 1942; he says:

> To speak of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings with our present world-situation, as the wicked jester-king of Hamlet puts it, is 'in equal scale weighing delight and dole.' It means putting the question, what can the spiritual forces of the enlightened and the perfect, of the teacher who embodied the Divine effect in the world-wide struggle and suffering caused by the demonic forces of man's nature; or, in Hindu terms, what can pure Sattva achieve against Rajas, reckless lust for power, aggressive selfishness, triumphant tyranny, and against Tamas, beastiality and sloth of man's animal nature?[3]

What pure Sattva can achieve is evident in the nearly global impact *The Gospel* has today. Even in its very shaping in English we have the participation of Aldous Huxley, the unique systematizer of Perennial Philosophy, the world's most significant mythologist, Joseph Campbell, and Margaret Woodrow Wilson, with a distinguished family background in politics! And the intertexts of the songs we owe to the poet John Moffit Jr. All brought together by Swami Nikhilananda the translator, a disciple of the Holy Mother herself, the Divine Consort of Sri Ramakrishna. Evidently, multicultural, varied religious backgrounds surfaced in the very appearance of

The Gospel. Above all, christening the Ramakrishna saga as *The Gospel* is an extraordinary commingling (and collapsing of the rigid boundaries) of religions, of faiths flung far apart earlier now coming home to one world religion heralded by Ramakrishna Vedanta.

Does this sound exaggerated enthusiasm? Yes, but with irrefutable evidence. I have no idea about exactly in how many languages – other than English – *The Gospel* is available. But one striking example is the Spanish version. We learn that Amado Nero (1870-1919) "the great Mexican poet and writer and one of the noblest and most famous writers of all times in Spanish literature," found the Spanish translation of Swami Abhedananda's condensed *Gospel* so fascinating that in a letter to the Secretary, Vedanta Society, Buenos Aires, he wrote:

> I must say that admirable *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* ... has been a real revelation to me ... What a profundity under its crystalline innocence! How beautiful are the parables (for example, of the wall behind which there is the Absolute)! I had read long ago with emotional interest *The Gospel of Buddha* translated and arranged methodically by Paul Carus. It impressed me much less than this delightful *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, so profoundly familiar, so familiarly profound.[4]

And he adds,

> From today, it will be one of the books at my bedside. One of those which I carry with me everywhere. It is a small mystic lamp for searching God outside this spider net of philosophies, of rituals, and of metaphysical disputes. It is impregnated with very pure love and no threat casts its shadow over those of mysterious witness.[5]

Countless are the deeply moving "testaments" of the impact of *The Gospel.* To cite another example: Andrew Harvey – unlike Anado Nero – chose only the Master's *Gospel* to take with him. In

his "Foreword" to a selection from *The Gospel* he writes:

> If I had to choose one book to take with me to contemplate for the rest of my life, or pick one book to give to a seeker today to help guide him or her into the joys and mysteries of the mystical life, it would be ... *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.*[6]

And what happens when you read *The Gospel*? Harvey says:

> ... it is to enter into a dance with the great mystic, with One constantly driving him on, and most mysteriously and challengingly of all, a dance with your own hidden innermost self, in one of the wildest and most generous incarnations. No one who meets with their whole being the small brown man with the short beard and half-shut obliquely set eyes that these pages celebrate will ever be the same.[7]

Sri Ramakrishna's *Gospel* is not a dry, cerebral text of prosaic homilies but one vibrant with irrepressible joy, with a rollicking sense of the comic and intertexts of enthralling songs and even dancing that is ignited by the songs. Not only Sri Ramakrishna sang (nearly 80 songs) but danced – a dance the origins of which are in concrete experience of God. He once said: "One of the signs to recognize a person who has truly seen God" is: "Sometimes [he] is like a young man, working and teaching with the strength of a lion." (*The Gospel*, p. 670) The teaching supplemented by the dance of this *Shiva roopa*. Indeed, he told a group of singers: "One should perspire, dancing and singing the name of God, as people do counting money." (*The Gospel*, p. 545)

III

But Sri Ramakrishna's *Kathamrita* is also an embodiment of far-reaching ideological correctives which offer a balanced view of life. To understand this we have to revise and revision the common

impression that *The Gospel* is a pure and simple hagiographic text, that it is wholly spiritual (with its ethical imperatives) and has a transcendental terrain. Yes, since Aldous Huxley in his Preface called it hagiographical one need not doubt its validity. Moreover, it is possible to think of it as a scripture and Ramakrishna himself explains in many contexts the role of a scripture. For instance, he declared: "I have had all the experiences that one should have, according to the scriptures, *after one's* direct experience of God ... I saw the visions described in the scriptures." And, "It was revealed to me," he says, "further that God Himself has become the universe and all its living beings and the twenty-four cosmic principles. It is like the process of evolution and involution." (*The Gospel*, p. 544)

Evolution and involution bring to the fore the Darwinian theories, alongside the Marxian and Freudian ones of money and mind. In a global context, it is interesting that these three who brought radical changes in many areas were contemporaries. Darwin (1809-1882), Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Freud (1856-1939) created, respectively, the hypotheses of biological determinism, dialectical materialism and the psychoanalytic theory. Marx was 18 when the Great Master's advent took place, Darwin 24 and Freud 20 years junior. All the three initiated radical changes in the areas of economics, evolution and erotics. Indeed, Joseph Campbell says that Darwin's *Origin of Species* became "the *Rig Veda* of nineteenth century materialism."[8] Now, the Ramakrishna-Vedanta played a crucial role in the emergence of what Philip Goldberg has termed *American Veda*. In this fascinating study, he accords a prime place to the root text, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* which the *Time* magazine called, "One of the most extraordinary religious documents." He adds that "The massive volume introduced thousands of Westerners to the unconventional holy man whom Joseph Campbell called 'the folk-sage who refutes the philitine' and who 'cut the hinges of the heavens and released the fountains of divine bliss'."[9] If, as Houston Smith, in his Foreword to the book says, "Vedanta quietly surfaces

in the daily lives of Americans",[10] its Founding Fathers are surely Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.

Contemporaneously, Sri Ramakrishna was undergoing "transformation" of consciousness which assigned proper place to the three areas which dominated several aspects of human knowledge. This can be described as Ramakrishna's contextual, dynamic dialectics!

If Darwin privileged the primates as origins of the species and in evolution emerged as the "selfish gene", Sri Ramakrishna hopped from tree to tree like a monkey with corresponding changes even in his eyes and, above all, enacted the archetypal form of Hanuman. M. reports what the Great Master himself told him: "While repeating the name of Rama, I sometimes assumed the attitude of Hanuman and fixed a tail to the lower end of my backbone. I was in a God-intoxicated state." (*The Gospel*, pp. 543-44)

The other context – Marx's postulates on money and capital – received, again, a strange, an incredible rebuttal: Sri Ramakrishna told the somewhat skeptical Dr. Sarkar: "My system is different. Well, what do you think of this? When I touch a coin my hand gets twisted, my breathing stops. Further, if I tie a knot in the corner of my cloth, I cannot breathe. My breathing stops until the knot is untied."

Dr. Sarkar needed no theory but empirically practical demonstration. The Master knew this. He "asked a devotee to bring a rupee. When Sri Ramakrishna held it in his hand, the hand began to writhe with pain. The Master's breathing also stopped. After the coin has been taken away, he breathed deeply and his hand relaxed. The doctor became speechless with wonder to see this strange phenomenon." (*The Gospel*, p. 845)

Even after seeing this, the Doctor is skeptical: and he says, "Action on the nerves," and "Will-force." The Master responds: "It

is God-force." (ibid.) All the three in harmony is Sri Ramakrishna's confluence.

The Master's "method" is not to negate or contradict anything. It is only to restore it to its proper place. In other words, every version has its own subversion to prevent the version from becoming a perversion. Perversion is according undue privilege to anything. Is wealth, capital or money to be shunned as inherently evil?

Should we affirm what a limerick in Bengali says:

Taka dharma, taka karma
Taka hi paramatapah, Yashya
gruhe taka nasti, tasya
gruhe kichu nai – sudhu
thak-thak-thak-thak.

Money is religion, money provides action, money is the supreme thing. He who has no money in his house, his house is empty, there is only a thak, thak sound.[11]

M. asks: "Sir, may I make an effort to make more money?" The Master's suggestion is comprehensive, practical and value-based: "It is permissible to do so to maintain a religious family. You may try to increase your income, but in an honest way. The goal of life is not the earning of money, but the service of God. Money is not harmful if it is devoted to the service of God." (*The Gospel*, p. 144)

This may appear too simplistic. But recent studies of Marx and Marxism are questioning whether the pure theories have any empirical validity. Eric Hobsbwam in his brilliant study of Marxism says that Marx was regarded by early responses, "as a pure theorist who has not tried to put his doctrines into practice. By revolutionary standards he seemed to be even less dangerous than the anarchists...." The result was [the alleged] "bourgeois readers approached him in a spirit of tranquility or in a spirit of Christian forbearance." In fact,

though Marx was "a rather bitter opponent of ministers of religion," those readers felt "they must not allow themselves to be prejudiced against the man."[12]

The most trenchant criticism quoted by Hobsbwam comes from Professor Trevor-Roper: "In the general evaluation of Marxist theories his historical interpretation was useless for the past and wholly discredited on the basis of prediction about the future, and that he [Marx] had been without significant influence on serious historians."

Sri Ramakrishna would question not theoretically but experimentally the nearly insane urge to make limitless money. In fact, the first value in "Purusharthas", *dharma*, has taken a severe beating. Money, instead of being a melody in the song of life has become an emperor of greed, the most dangerous malady. Even when it is meant to be a means for social well-being, it has become an irrational symbol of flaunting one's social status.

Sri Ramakrishna spoke about his experiment to Bankim in this regard. "Sitting on the bank of Ganges before Panchavati I used to say, 'Rupee is clay and clay is rupee. Then I threw both into the Ganges." Bankim is shocked: "Indeed! Money is clay! Sir, if you have a few pennies you can help the poor. If money is clay, then a man cannot give in charity or do good to others." (*The Gospel*, p. 670)

The context is one of charity and what we call these days Corporate Social Responsibility. Economic recession has toned down but has never terminated the lust for money, fulfilled by fair or foul means. Even when social accountability is surfacing considerably, Sri Ramakrishna knew that the ego remains king-size. "Serve God in all beings," says the Great Master, "not through men alone but through animals and other living beings as well." But, "one should not work for name and fame." It should be done "without attachment." In itself, it is Yoga. Note the mention of animals: by the Master.

Prevention of cruelty to animals has today got institutionalized. It is symbolic of the interconnected contexts in which all forms of life exist. Moreover, in Indic traditions "texts" *granthas*, are described as *kalpataru* and *kamadhenu*: the wish-fulfilling tree and the desire-satisfying cow.

The most memorable event in Sri Ramakrishna's concern for us is the Kalpataru Day wherein he blessed all those who were present with assurance that whatever they desired would be fulfilled. But, then, desires which are desirable – this is the criterion of fulfillment. This condition is not a pious platitude. It is a rigorous condition not only of ethics but of economics. Wants are many but few need fulfillment.

In these contexts there are two instances which show that Sri Ramakrishna is indeed a prophet. Look at the remark made by Stephen Green, Chairman of HSBC: "At its best, there is no more powerful engine for development and liberation than the market. At the worst, it is a dangerous moral pollutant which nourishes some very poisonous weeds in it."[13] Remember that Sri Ramakrishna used to tell his disciples that when you go to the market and buy something, insist on the seller giving that little extra of the thing.

IV

We may think that Sri Ramakrishna's language is rigorously religious. But we hardly notice that it is instinct with inalienable psychological implications. Increasing recognition is being paid to the fact that the contemporary economic crisis is rooted in an unregenerate Self. Martha C. Nussbaum, citing Mahatma Gandhi, points out that, "the political struggle for freedom and equality must first of all be a struggle within each person as compassion and respect contend against fear, greed and narcissistic aggression." In other words, as Gandhiji emphasized, "the connection between psychological balance and political balance, arguing that greed,

desire, aggression and narcissistic anxiety are forces inimical to the building of a free and democratic nation."[14]

Nussbaum cites Mahatma Gandhi as an exemplar and Gandhi has connection with Sri Ramakrishna. Gandhi's "Foreword" to the Master's life is intensely suggestive sustaining deep reflections on it. Particularly his observation: Sri Ramakrishna's "sayings are not those of a mere learned man but they are pages from the book of life. They are revelations of his own experiences."[15]

Authenticated by his own experiences Sri Ramakrishna gave a new dimension to pedagogy. This is of great significance. A significance which is of immense value in enriching the present STEM-oriented 'education': Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. Enriching with the needed content of values. If the STEM emphasizes important areas of human consciousness, the knowledge so acquired has accelerated, rather than tone down, the unethical uses to which such "knowledge" are prone. The academically distinguished persons trained by high profile institutes of technology, business and management turn their enormous intelligence to corrupt practices. In fact, some corporates may also be termed *corruptorates*.

Is this not some basic anomaly between the dialectics of desire and the imperatives of ethics? *Artha and Kama* are unforgettably crystallized by Sri Ramakrishna into "woman and gold" or "lust and greed." I have suggested earlier that *The Gospel's* teachings do not overlook the theories of Marxism and its implications for societal transformation. Ramakrishna accepts the economic factor yet it has to function (as earlier responses to Marxist studies have suggested) with "forbearance" and "tranquility".

The Darwinian, Marxist theories are further extended by Freud. In an important study, which he describes as "The new science of evolutionary psychology", Richard Wright points out: "Freud

thought of himself as a Darwinian. He tried to look at the human mind as a product of evolution, a fact that – by itself, at least – should forever endear him to evolution psychologists. Anyone who sees humans as animals, derived by sexual and other coarse impulses, can't be all bad."[16] But, says Wright, "Freud misunderstood evolution in basic and elementary ways [and] they [led him] to say so many things that sound nonsensical to today's Darwinians."[17] Indeed, "Freud's most basic idea about the mind [is] it is a place of conflict between animal impulses and social reality."[18] An idea which Sri Ramakrishna handled experimentally so that the immense spiritual potential of the mind is unlocked.

What is Sri Ramakrishna's text which neither contradicts nor commends the irrational? With Freud he would assert "mind is all". And this very mind which can mislead can also rightly lead. A vast reservoir of energy, mind can be "addictive as also elevating. It is this addiction which tilts the balance which the Great Master calls "woman". Not a gender-based sign but a symbol for emotional addition to the body whether of a man or a woman. After a lucid survey of the basic attributes of Buddhism and Hinduism, interspersed with citations from the *Bhagavadgita*, Wright himself points out: "There is great wisdom – not only about the addictiveness of pleasures but about their ephemarality. The essence of addiction, after all, is that pleasure tends to dissipate and leave the mind agitated hungry for more."[19]

Elaborating this Wright says, "The idea that just, one more dollar, one more dalliance, one more rung on the ladder will leave us feeling sated reflects a misunderstanding about human nature – a misunderstanding moreover, that is built into human nature; we are designed to feel that the next great goal will being bliss, and the bliss is designed to evaporate shortly after we get there. Natural selection has a malicious sense of humor: it leads us along with a series of promises and keeps saying 'just kidding'."[20]

Sri Ramakrishna is not "kidding". *The Gospel* does not have any cynical view of taking us for a ride. It is a natural context of both attractions of the body and their transcendence. He sues the simple image of a camel eating thorns. Citing the method of the Avadhuta's learning about pleasure from natural objects, the Master says: "In a certain place the fishermen were catching fish. A kite swooped and snatched a fish. At the sight of the fish about a thousand crows chased the kite and made a great noise with their cawing." They followed it relentlessly – in all directions and "as the kite began to fly about in confusion, lo, the fish dropped from its mouth. The crows at once let the kite alone and flew after the fish." The Avadhuta learnt a lesson: "... as long as a man has the fish, that is, worldly desires, he must ... suffer," "from worry, anxiety and restlessness." (*The Gospel*, p. 314)

It is, in short, a matter of balancing desire and its desirableness. And Freud's views that sexual desire arises from all kinds of complexes, parental loss, mother fixation and the other components do not simply work in the case of Sri Ramakrishna. In other words, as Sri Ramakrishna says: "... how clever we are! How we enjoy pleasures – money, honor, the senses!" But we are like crows, "strutting about" but fattening on filth. Is Sri Ramakrishna harsh? Yes. He is. He has to be. But, then, he also has an agenda of instruction, of how we should be taught. How the same psyche can be channeled for more integral uses.

Students of mind and brain, whether it is psychiatry or neuroscience, M.'s portrait of the amazing range of the Great Master's consciousness leaves them breathless (if they are open in their assumptions). As Chetanananda's biography of M. shows, we have in *The Gospel* records of Sri Ramakrishna in the states of Samadhi, meditation, prayer, singing, dancing, worshipping, envisioning, even dreaming, laughing and handling variety of temperaments and physiological insights. In the midst of all this explaining recondite philosophical issues in terms of parables and analogies. And there are visits to the theatre, circus and other amusements, on the way

marveling at the monuments of the emerging Empire, hearing the music accompanying the dances of the Sahibs and Memsahibs, travelling in a quaint carriage or by boat on the sacred waters of the Ganga! *The Gospel*, in short, is a incredible, encyclopedic text with visuals and words which evoke in revealing detail almost every aspect of the City of Joy.

V

So far we have seen Sri Ramakrishna's text in terms of three contexts: economics, enjoyment and the ethics which should underlie their handling. Balance is the key. Thus, we can say if the impact of *The Gospel* is achieving remarkable resonance today, in terms of Darwin, Marx and Freud, as contemporary intertexts, in its original form in Bengali, the textual tradition results in a uniquely structured volume of the *Kathamrita*. Before we look at the structural uniqueness, of the Bengali original, the amazing variety of visitors who come to see Sri Ramakrishna is, indeed, incredible. As Swami Chetanananda's marvelous biography of M. shows, the variety includes scholars, creative writers, scientists, doctors, lawyers, teachers, professors, social activists, actors, actresses, dramatists, singers, religious leaders cum reformers, landlords, and women devotees. And M. himself assumes multiple names and selves: Mani, Mohini Mohan, a servant, a devotee, an Englishman, etc. Even children – at least as one incident shows – reveled in the joyous company of Bhavatarini's child. In fact, Sri Ramakrishna tells us: "The Paramahamsa is like a four-year old child. He sees everything filled with consciousness." And *this* Paramahamsa sings a song for the six-seven-year old child Viswambhara: "Come let me braid your hair / lest your husband scolds you / When he beholds you!" (*The Gospel*, p. 490). Entertaining a child, and elevating the context to tell us the nature of a Paramahamsa as that of a child! Texts within texts, play within play.

Entertaining the child, enlightening the grown-up: both point

to the fact that Sri Ramakrishna teaches without allowing the receivers to guess that they are being taught. Perhaps, the content of Sri Ramakrishna's *Dakshineswar Vidyalaya* curriculum included an astonishing variety of discourses, alternating with songs, parables, visits to the city of joy – fun in seeing circus, museum, theatre, temples – and other items too numerous to mention. The *Kathamrita* has the narrative richness and the family feuds resulting in political rivalries of the *Mahabharata*, the unique devotional fervor of the Prema Yoga of the *Bhāgavat*, the serene pathos of *The Ramayana*, the worldly wisdom of the *dharma shastras*, the wit and wisdom of *chatuvu*, the *jnana marga* of the *Upanishads*, the narrative dynamics of the *Puranas*, the intertexts of Psalms and parables, the rapidly changing lifestyles of Calcutta, the theatre of the day, the folk traditions of communication; the incorporation of Tantric, Baul and other traditions.

For further illumination about the pedagogic context – specially of significance to this *Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira* – we have a significant suggestion made by Martha C. Nussbaum: "children are naturally curious about the rituals, ceremonies and celebrations of other nations and religions, so it is a good idea to capitalize on the curiosity early, presenting stories of the world's varied traditions in an age-appropriate form ... creating in the classroom a sense of global curiosity and respect." Moreover, "children can just as well hear a Hindu or Buddhist story sometimes and not always a classic American story expressing Protestant American values."[21]

Pointing out further implications of such an attempt, Nussbaum says: "Hinduism and Buddhism are the most rapidly growing religions in the United States, so exposure of this sort will foster not just better global citizenship but better US citizenship as well. Curricula should be carefully planned from an early age to impart an ever richer and more nuanced knowledge of the world in histories and cultures." In effect, "an adequate education for living in a

pluralistic democracy must be multicultural ...." and multireligious.[22]

The Gospel has already entered the multi-religious and multicultural ethos of our day. The parables of Sri Ramakrishna are ideally suited to achieve the life-skills as narratives. The fascinating stories appear in journals such as *Parabola*. And one story attracted the narrative magic of Paul Coelho, the celebrated author of *The Alchemist*. The story told by an anonymous narrator, Raj – Boy Gopala – finds a place in one of his books. Above all, we have Babaji Bob Kindler's comprehensive volume *An Extensive Anthology of Sri Ramakrishna's Stories* which contains, genre-wise, not just parables but "Enlightening sayings, stories, Anecdotes, Metaphors and Allegories."[23]

All these are of immense potential narratives for LIFE SKILLS, in particular and personality development pedagogies. But with a difference: life skills which stem from values and Ramakrishna-Vivekananda traditions. Secular success is possible through life-skills but when success is measured in terms of economics and enjoyment (profit and pleasure), they spell disaster to the overall orientation of life: Self-knowledge and what Sri Ramakrishna phrased as "*Jeevaner uddeshya Ishvar labh*": The aim of life is God-realization. (In fact, in our languages, 'labh' has association with 'gain' and 'profit'.)

VI

Finally we have now an opportunity to see the original Bengali text in its exact form and structure without any chronological changes. The English translation follows a different – the historical narrative form. I felt that the Bengali text has an ambience which has its own unique charm. Sri Ramakrishna's Bengali (with the little knowledge I have) I felt is so enchanting that it is nearly untranslatable. There is magic and music (no rhetoric meant) and the intertexts from the *Gita* and other scriptures demand a new reading of the text.

Granthas are *granthis*: texts are ties. They bind us. *The Gospel* also binds us but with the unbroken thread of love. One has to

then redefine threads as so many avenues of significance. Every concern of ours is handled by the Great Master. If we get rattled by the global scenario now, recall what Sri Ramakrishna said. Swami Saradananda reports that Ramakrishna said, "Whenever there is any trouble in the Divine Mother's empire, I shall have to rush to stop it like a government officer!" This is not surprising because if Indian writers in English are writing back to the Empire, the spirituality of Sri Ramakrishna writes back to the Empire in a holistic way for all contexts.[24]

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The Language of Connectivity

Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay

The first Bengali book of grammar, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed's *A Grammar of the Bengali Language* (1778) was published for the benefit of the foreigners, *firinginam upakarartha* , twenty-one years after India lost its freedom at Palashi (Plassey). William Carey later published his book of Bengali grammar in 1801 from Serampore Mission to acquaint the British "writers" with the native language. It was followed by two text-books – Ramram Basu's *Raja Pratapaditya Carita* (The Character of King Pratapaditya) and Mrityunjay Vidyalankar's *Batris Sinhasan* (Thirty-two thrones), both published in 1802. The first book of Bengali essays, apart from the text-books, is Rammohan Roy's *Vedanta Grantha* (The Book of Vedanta). In its introduction Rammohan wrote:

> So far in the prose of this language no Sastra or no description of poetry has been written. For the lack of practice many people of this land cannot make out any meaning connecting two or three sentences readily. This is particularly felt when the meaning of a translated text from the laws is to be understood.[1]

It may be remembered here that this book was written in 1815, fifty-eight years after the imposition of British rule in India.

In the following six decades there was continuous propaganda in the speeches delivered in the British Parliament, in various minutes prepared by the British and verses written by the English poets that the British rule in India was for saving the country from a barbaric state. Thus the imperial process of "civilizing" India started and

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we were made to believe that we were being ruled with the British batons and bullets for our own good. One now recalls that many Indians, particularly a part of the intelligentsia, misconceived the British propaganda as true. In the perspective of this process of colonizing the psyche of the colonized, Bengali prose was growing and developing. Rammohan had his advice on how to read and use that prose in the following statement:

> As long as the verb of a sentence is not reached, do not treat it as the end of the sentence and do not try to comprehend its meaning.[2]

It was, however, this relationship between the subject and the verb in which the basic meaning of a sentence is supposed to be embedded that was virtually rendered meaningless by Sri Ramakrishna when he said to 'Master':

> In the rich man's house, the maid-servant is doing all work but her mind remains arrested in her own home in the village. While taking care of her master's son as her own son she says, "My Ram" "My Hari", but at the same time she knows in her mind that they are in no way connected with her.[3]

Rammohan felt that many people could not make out the meaning of a small paragraph connecting two or three sentences and he added that it was particularly felt when the meaning of a translated version of law was to be comprehended. From the two words "Law" and "Translation", it is obvious that the basic problem was that of the comprehension of the translated version of the British law then in force in India which was primarily based on the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.

In the traditional system of Indian law and justice (whether it was just or not is here beside the point), there was no lack of coordination either at the syntactic level or the semantic. For the aquatic tortoise moving about in water had its mind on the bank of the river, the dry land, where its eggs were laid.[4] Perhaps the

question of disconnectivity raised by Rammohan was not just one of linguistic connectivity for an unambiguous meaning, not the ordinary question of integrating the subject with the finite verb: it was arguably a political question involving the "twain" – the colonizer and the colonized – that could not meet. Sri Ramakrishna felt this complexity and that is why he told Master who had read the philosophy of Kant, Hegel, Herbert Spencer and others:

> It is always the same with you people in Kolkata – all the time delivering lectures and making people understand. There is no attempt to understand one's own self. Who are you to make others understand.... You try to acquire wisdom and cultivate bhakti (devotion) within you.[5]

Why this displeasure about Kolkata and its people? Does it merely reflect the inherent contradiction between the village and the city? One recalls that Sri Ramakrishna went to Vaidyanath, Kasidham and Prayag with his mother, Ram Chatujye (Chattopadhyay) and two sons of Mathurbabu in 1863. There he was "mostly on trance or rapt in devotion". After five years, in 1868, he once again went to Kasidham, Prayag and Vrindavan with Mathurbabu and his wife, home-maker Jagadamba Dasi, and Hriday, his sister's son. How was Sri Ramakrishna in those ancient Indian cities! In the notes to the *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*) it is recorded:

> At Manikarnika in Kasi he saw in his meditation the *gambhira vishmay* (solemn and amazing) appearance of Vishwanath, the other time was pronouncing the name of Tarakbrahma in the ears of the dying people. Also communicating with the silent monk Tailanga Swami observing his ascetical austerities. In his ecstatic eyes he saw Sri Krishna in the lap of Basudev at Dhrubaghat in Mathura, observed Sri Krishna crossing the Yamuna with his herd of cattle at dusk, and came across other *lila*s too. He was so happy to converse with Mother Ganga in her elated mood observing the love making of Radha in the pleasure garden.[6]

Why was Sri Ramakrishna so comfortable and happy in the traditional Indian towns like Kasidham, Mathura and Vrindavan, but quite critical about Calcutta, the city just on the other side of the Ganga? Here lies the basic difference between the making of a traditional Indian town and the other developed by the colonizers. Kasidham, Mathura, Vrindavan were developed with familial intimacy with the rest of India. This is why Rabindranath Tagore wrote about Kasi, "Kasi is practically not a part of any particular province of India" (Lecture delivered at 'Bangiya Sahitya Sammelan' on 20 Falgun 1329B.C.). On the other hand the British rulers built the city of Calcutta with negation with the rest of Bengal. The digging of the canal around the city, building walls and making forts on the one hand created this physical disconnectivity, and, on the other, a psychological fencing with barbed wire also came to be raised. Thus Calcutta and the rest of Bengal, two disjointed places, developed two distinctly opposite modes of discourses – on one side the language of law, the language of black gowns, the language of bureaucracy, the language of logic, the language of argument, the language of lecture, and, on the other, the language of feeling, the language of *bhakti* (devotion), the language of tears:

> I promised green coconut and sugar to Mother (goddess Kali) for Keshab. In the last quarter of the night, I woke up from sleep and went on weeping in front of Mother. I appealed to her, 'Mother, recover Keshab from his sickness. If Keshab is no more, whom should I talk to when I would go to Kolkata? That is why I promised green coconut and sugar.'[7]

Sri Ramakrishna did not learn this language – this mode of discourse – from any Anglophile school. He acquired it from the Puranic tales that he heard in his Kamarpukur days, from folk theatre, from the retelling of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata by the bards, from the mythological stories narrated by the village narrators, from the story of the Yogada, from the popular tale of the deity of Madanmohanji of Bishnupur.

Indeed, this language cannot be learnt from a book of grammar with a long list of verb patterns alone. To know it, one has to "dive deep into one's precious golden heart", to quote Sri Ramakrishna. The Bengali prose that was developed during the early days of the British rule, the prose that steered clear of the folk feeling referred to, had the elements of scholarship but was altogether devoid of the basic elements of Indian faith and philosophy of living – *viveka* and *vairagya*. Naturally words piled up to a monumental height but no *Kathamrita* (Nectar of words) was possible. Perhaps in the face of such listless, lifeless and stony words, Zivko Cingo (1935-1987), well-known Macedonian writer, wrote in his story titled 'The letter and writings of Lazar':

> Put aside pencil and paper, Talasa: Don't be a simple scribbler of words. There is no dearth of paper full of writing. Inscribe me into your soul, Talasa; what matters is the soul, the spirit of the man who is going to write.

In a certain phase of the colonial rule, even the medieval period of Indian history, so unique in its literary harvest, came to be marked as 'dark', folk culture came to be discarded as uncivilized and meditation ignored because in the pro-active West there was no history of silence whatsoever. In this crucial historical juncture an alternative voice – both in mood and mode – found its first expression in Sri Ramakrishna. Thereafter the voice was reinforced by Vivekananda, Rabindranath and others for asserting our Indianness.

The establishment of Ramakrishna Mission by Swami Vivekananda, Santiniketan Ashrama by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore and Sabarmati Ashrama by Mahatma Gandhi were three major attempts in this direction. But the hangover of colonialism is something we have not recovered from yet. When the Sahitya Akademi was established in 1954, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) in his address said that Indian literature is one though it is

written in many languages. We subscribe to the oneness theory of Indian literature but at the same time we cannot discard the vast unwritten oral literatures of our country. However the same Sahitya Akademi, after nearly forty years of its establishment, introduced the Bhasha Samman for both ethnic languages as well as scholarly researches on medieval literature. The Akademi has also initiated the translation of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* into all the languages recognized by it. This has not been properly publicized but this is a very significant move – a kind of home-coming – from Indian literature to *bharatiya sahitya*.

Our basic concern in the use of a language should not be its syntax alone, the mere ability to connect the subject with the verb, the noun with the adjective and the verb with the adverb: it must connect a man with another man, a heart with another heart. It should be a soul to soul communication where one can share the joy and agony of the other. The real cultivation of language and literature, as we have seen in *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, would be possible only in this direction. Otherwise, what we would be producing would only be Bengali Literature, not *bangla sahitya*.

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Concept and Power of Music According to Sri Ramakrishna

Swami Sarvagananda

Spiritual giants like Sri Ramakrishna, Meerabai, Sant Kavir, Tukaram and others conceptualized music in a way which is entirely different from that of common people and it's more difficult to understand how they subsequently, with a mystic power, contextualized music in their personal lives or in the lives of their devotees. Basically it is because they could unleash a spiritual wave, imperceptible to normal human beings. Spiritualization of music may be described as "the Foot Print of God". In the modern context with the development of science on one hand and sensual enjoyment of life on the other, it is difficult to understand how the spiritual awareness is evoked through music unless they are looked through the microscope of Sri Ramakrishna's life and the philosophy behind. The wonderful example given by Sri Ramakrishna, of a boundary wall with a small hole on it can be well applied to explain that music is like a window through which the soul of the devotee, entangled with worldly affairs of finiteness, can a have a peer to the Infinite bliss of God. If you don't believe in God then also it is true that a musician can have the touch of the Infinite through music. Music with the help of their 'perfection'. Therefore, music can also be regarded as a 'carrier' which takes the musician from the realm of finiteness to the Infinite.

Music was like the salt of life in the entire existence of Sri Ramakrishna and He always considered it to be the easiest way of access to an ocean of ideas in a capsulated form. At times Sri Ramakrishna used to get intoxicated with music which consequently made him forget about his own physical existence.

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Sometimes it so happened that a devotee came to him devastatingly afflicted with a shock that got soothed when he heard the celestial music from Sri Ramakrishna. On one such occasion some ardent devotee brought his friend who was totally despondent due to the sudden demise of his elderly son that made him almost dumb founded. People around him were verily engaged in consoling him for the sad event. Sri Ramakrishna was found to be silent. There was no sign of reduction of the burning of the heart of the devotee. It was a grim situation and the well wishers present there were all at their wits end as to how to console him further. All of a sudden Sri Ramakrishna started singing a song: "Jiva Sājo Samore". A kind of bliss-wave started to smear the entire region as to make every body cool and mesmerized. The words of the song, as it were, having thrust up on the mind of the unfortunate despaired father. He was enchanted and gradually comprehended the meaning of the song which says: every body must get ready for scuffle with time which according to Sri Shankaracharya is: "Kālah Jagad Bhakshakah", that is, time eats up every thing in this world. Therefore, all of us must get to understand Time, the perpetual eater. This is a famous song composed by Dasarathi Roy a great mystic of the 18th century. When Sri Ramakrishna finished his song, the dejected father was totally cool and found a great solace unspeakable. An affable joy engulfed the minds of others present there also. Music, therefore, was skillfully applied as a sustain reliever by a musician none other than Sri Ramakrishna.

On another occasion music was found to be mode of communication which could demotivate a powerful personality like Swami Vivekananda from his premature decision of leaving the world for good due to acute psychological unrest combined with philosophical instability due to the untoward situation created by his family disaster. Bewildered Narendranath came to Dakshineswar to bid a farewell to his beloved Guru and go out to some unknown place for spiritual Sadhana. Never had he expressed his desire to any one. Sri Ramakrishna looked at his countenance and felt what was going

to happen. With tearful eyes he started singing a song: "Kathā koite dorāi, nā koileo dorāi" which means 'I am afraid to tell you, I am afraid not to tell you, I have a doubt, I may lose you for ever'. The unleashed pathos of the song and its inner appeal saturated with infinite love of Sri Ramakrishna invincibly touched the heart of Narendranath and, he decided not to leave. All others present there could not understand what was going on; when asked, Sri Ramakrishna said, "this is in between us". You will be able to site innumerable incidents in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* where he used music as medium of communication of his ideas.

Sri Ramakrishna was not a musician in the common sense of the term because he did not learn music systematically as Narendranath Dutta did. But if you believe that Sri Ramakrishna was the incarnation of God, and if you believe that the genesis of music is God and God only, then the very existence of music has to be fended by Sri Ramakrishna. Nāda Brahma, according to the Upanishads, was the cause of this creation. We don't have any scope to discuss in details as to how this world was created or as to how the seven notes e.g. SA, RE, GA, MA, PA, DHA, NI came in to existence but it is true that all these notes have a power which could be identified with a presiding deity. Bhairavi Brahmani, the Tantrik Guru of Sri Ramakrishna revealed to him that in Divya Bhāva Sri Ramakrishna had conquered these presiding deities who govern the notes. Naturally it was not very strange that people got mesmerized when Sri Ramakrishna used to sing. For an atheist Sri Ramakrishna can be looked up on as Perfection. One cannot deny the hypnotic effect of the performance of a man who is perfect in any field of life whatsoever. Whether it is music or fine arts or sports or sculpture or engineering or computer animation, Perfection enchants every one. Therefore from whichever direction we try to understand how music was conceptualized by Sri Ramakrishna himself, we get to a kind of mind grabbing experience.

Swami Vivekananda came in contact for the first time with Sri Ramakrishna through music only. That was a historic event. Gradually Narendranath learned to understand music not only as a recreating

or comforting experience of the mind but as a sort of commuter with the primordial force functioning beyond this visible universe. Music for him was something beyond even *buddhi* or intellect. Swami Vivekananda could tangibly feel that Sri Ramakrishna's music was like a device for transmission of power. The wonderful Mantra discovered by Sri Ramakrishna through the word "MA" was indeed the modus operandi for the aforementioned transmission of spiritual power. This is also, as mentioned before, as it were, the window for the spiritual aspirant for a footage from with form to formlessness. This is what you may come to the consideration of external manifestation of the Nāda Brahma. Then the word "Ma" may also be designated as an instrument of philosophical Induction as well as philosophical Deduction (Adhyāropa and Apavāda: that is, shuttling between the transcendental and the eminent). The stages of the manifestation of Nāda Brahma is described as Parā, Pashyanti, Vāk, Vaikhari; for Sri Ramakrishna the unique Mantra "MA" was the medium of transport from Vaikhari (this gross world) to Parā (the Transcendental Truth) and vice versa. Sri Ramakrishna used music also as the 'regeneration' of a spiritual power, but for transmission of this power he required a competent medium for which Narendranath was the best choice. The day when Narendranath came to Dakshineswar haunted by an urge for a solution of the acute problem of the instability of his family due to the sudden demise of his father, he was instructed by Sri Ramakrishna to approach Ma Bhavatarini with a prayer for his family's protection at least with day-to-day meal and a place to reside. Thrice he went to Ma Bhavatarini and came back unsuccessful only rather praying for knowledge, devotion and dispassion and finally surrendered to Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna assured him that there will be no dearth of food and clothe and a place to reside for his family. Narendranath could feel the touch of the divine power – Ādyā Shakti and wanted to learn a song of the Divine Mother which Sri Ramakrishna obliged him for. The nocturnal hours, that day, were all spent by Narendranath singing the song: "Ma twam hi Tārā"; Sri Ramakrishna transmitted his power to Narendranath through music. This would not have been

possible for a common man but for Narendranath. It was possible because his was an accomplished musician.[1]

The catholicity of Sri Ramakrishna's ideas gradually penetrated in the Vivekananda's concept of music. As a matter of fact the catholic attitude of the Hindu religion also applies to Indian music and just to uphold the vastness of Indian music we wish to comprehend right away. If we start from the peripheral music such as folk songs, there are on average more than three distinct styles in each state or region in India in respect of language and religion. Basically there are two principal styles in music in India, north and south, one Hindustani Sangeet and the other Carnatic Sangeet. But throughout the length and breadth of India, the peripheral music as well as the provincial rhythm styles are expressive of one common parlance, a common appeal, a similar pathos. The more you go deep into the science of music the greater is the number of gateways and vaster is the conceptual proliferations. But the genesis was found in the Vedic times, the set of three notes (Ma, Pa, Dha called the Vedic notes) is considered to be the insignia in Indian music.

Presently there is not much scope to go in to the details of different styles of music prevailing in the Indian musical concept, yet we may note that the principal styles in the Hindustani as well as in Carnatic music as: Dhrupad, Dhamar, Kheyal, Thumri, Ghazal, Tappa as well as Varnam, Geetham, Swarajaati, Pallabi, Kirthi, Tailana etc. in classical Hindustani and classical Carnatic music respectively. And Kirthan, Baul, Bhatiyali, Abhang, Jhumar, Sadra as the folk styles.

Sri Ramakrishna was fond of Kirthana songs. Narendranath having a classical background was an outright critic of Kirthana and was an ardent admired of the Dhrupad style. Sri Ramakrishna's influence over Narendranath gradually brought about a revolutionary change in his concept of music. At the fag end of his life Vivekananda expressed his idea in a letter that the best music would come out through the harmony of Dhrupad and Kirthana. Therefore it appears that the appreciation of Vivekananda for a nonlinear synthesis of music had its origin in Sri Ramakrishna only. Of course, Vivekananda was very much

vocal about the synthesis of the Western and Indian Classical music which he accomplished very successfully through the Vesper Hymn of Sri Ramakrishna that is sung every evening at the Belur Math.

Thus, we find that there began a conceptual revolution in the history of music in India at the advent of Sri Ramakrishna and its implications are still evident through contextualization of devotional songs as and when they are either demonstrated or read out from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. The mission for which Sri Ramakrishna came was to spiritualize the world, so to say, to spiritualize music either, in contrary to the way we have been using music for commercial and recreational purpose.

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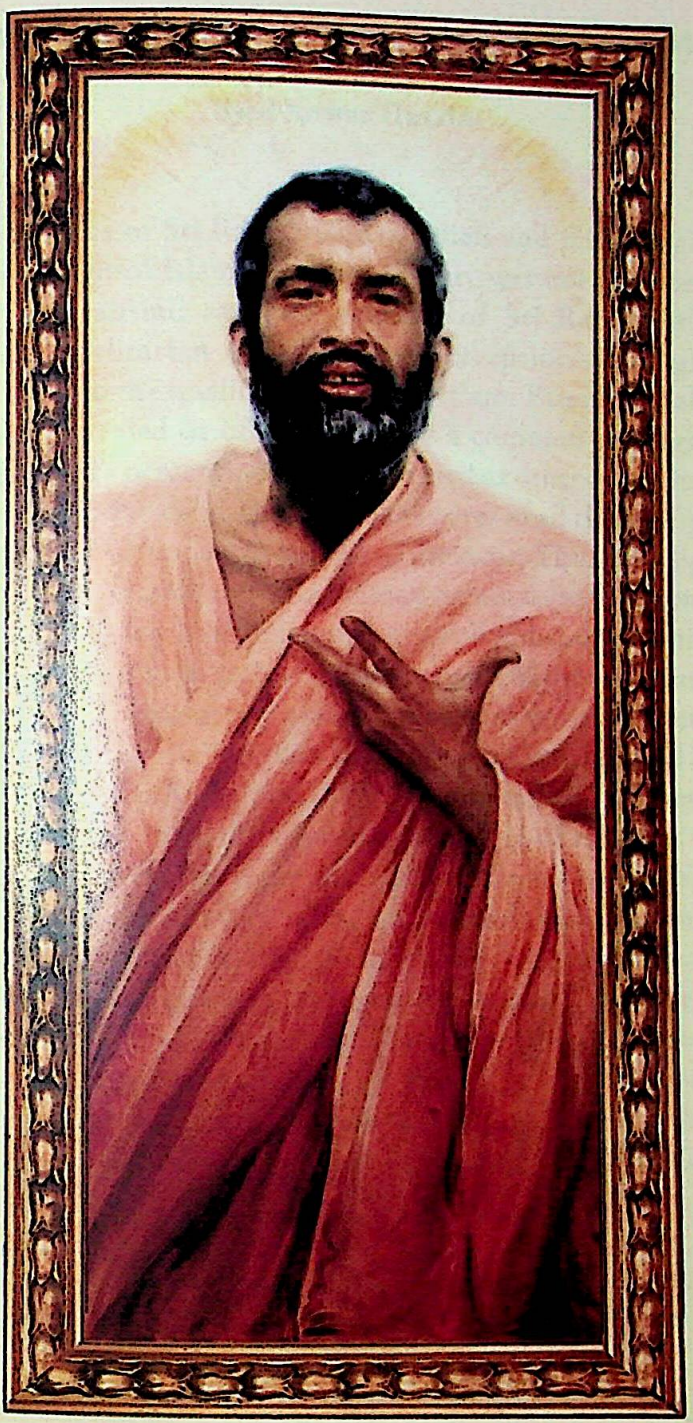
Note

[1] In his childhood Narendranath got the chance to learn music and in later teens, he started learning classical music under Beni Ustad, a disciple of Ahmed Khan of Gwalior Gharana. Vivekananda was brought up in traditional musical environment all along and learnt classical music technically and methodically along the line of Guru Parampara. In his younger age he was interested in the Western music and its 'Harmony' because, maybe, then in Calcutta, Krishnadhan Bandyopadhyay, Dakshināchāran Sen, Promod Thakur etc. were trying to apply Western Harmony to contemporary Bengali songs popular in the Brahmo Samaj. Swamiji loved courage, bravery and inculcated himself martial attitude. He believed that with the practice of Western Harmony, our 'soft' youth will be imbibed with martial vivacity which was very much needed at that time. However, his musical talent was quite expressive in his book *Sangeet Kalpataru*, now adored by the doctoral and post-doctoral students as well.

Sri Ramakrishna and Our Times



Portrait of Sri Ramakrishna by Frank Dvorak

Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas and Islam Today

Syed Anwar Husain

The essence of Sri Ramakrishna's beliefs and preachings was similar to that of Islam. Such a similarity was not providential or circumstantial; rather a product of Sri Ramakrishna's humane, egalitarian and inclusive perception of religions. These are also the qualities of the core Islam. Essentially, all the religions, revealed or otherwise, carry a common message. Sri Ramakrishna's perception of Islam as well as other religions had origins in how he delved deep into the cores of all these religions and imbibed the underlying spirit of the same. Thus his religious philosophy was anchored in a deductive, not inductive context. Perhaps unlike any other religious personality throughout history he was the one to practise himself some religions, at least for some time, before emerging with perceptions or convictions *vis-à-vis* these religions. This way of comprehending religion other than his own was for him without any alternative as he was not literate enough to go for a fastidious reading of religious texts. He had, however, the right and endowed mind to understand the core message of every faith, and, in which capacity he was found to have excelled than anyone else. Such an exercise left him with the conviction in the essential commonality of messages of all religions; and also the core of his preachings *Jato mat, tato path* – so many paths as there are views. To him religions are different paths to reach a common destination. This was thus Sri Ramakrishna's recipe for religious pluralism; again, something not divergent from the spirit of Islam.

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A juxtaposition of Sri Ramakrishna's ideas and essentials of Islam is attempted in this discussion. The discussion opens with a brief resume on the meaning and inclusive spirit of Islam. The section following sheds light on Sri Ramakrishna's encounter with Islam and its fallout on his religious psyche. The third section compares and contextualizes both these perspectives on religion. This section also highlights the essence of Sri Ramakrishna's religious philosophy. The final section puts together some relevant concluding observations.

I

Original Islam and Muslims Today

In the recent past both Islam and Muslims have been victims of maligned ascriptions.[1] Such maligned ascriptions, however, do not intrinsically relate either to this religion or its followers. While the original Islam is certainly not what it is made out by its errant followers the Muslims supposedly steadfast in sticking to their pristine faith cannot claim to have done enough to rid either their religion or themselves of such maligned ascriptions. As it is, some Islamists and their outfits have spawned intolerance and terror in the name of Islam. They are also reported (as well as found) to have put in place their own distorted construct of intolerant, extremist and exclusivist Islam. Neither such Muslims nor their brand of Islam represent Islam and Muslims *per se*.

Islam, in its spirit and content, is inclusive, tolerant and universal. In fact, Islam, like all other religions, is not purported to be the religion of a specific community, and its major source book the Holy Quran for Muslims only. The language and terminologies of the Holy Quran are universal and egalitarian in content and message. For instance, when Allah is described as *Rabbul al- Amin*, the meaning, lord of the universe, should not be lost on Muslims or followers of any religion. In such a context, it would be quite illogical to suggest that only Muslims amongst the denizens of the earth would enjoy the favour of Allah to the exclusion of other

religionists. Moreover, it may be noted that the prophet of Islam (PBUH) is described with a universal appeal – *uswatun hasana* – the ideal for the whole world. As is stated in the words of Allah, "We sent thee not save as mercy for all peoples" (*al- Anbiya* 21: 107). Moreover, the prophet is reported to have made the categorical statement that, "I have been sent as a guiding mercy"; and the Holy Quran considers the whole humanity *ashraful makhlukat* – best of all creations; and humans *khalifatullah* – vicegerents of Allah on the earth. It is therefore pertinent to take note of the fact that the whole humanity is designated as either *ashraful makhlukat* or *khalifatullah*, and not only Muslims. Another pertinent point to be made in such a context is that Islam is the generic name of a religion that had long been in evolution; and by the time of Muhammad (PBUH) the process of evolution had been declared by Allah complete. As Allah pronounced, "This day I have perfected your religion. For you completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for Islam as your religion" (*al-Maidah* 5: 3); and "The religion before Allah is Islam" (*al-Imran* 3: 19). Islam implies here a generic terminology for religion, not a specific religion.

Such inclusiveness and egalitarianism of Islam is corroborated by some Quranic verses and *hadiths* (prophetic traditions). Some of the Quranic verses are:

— "We sent not a messenger except (to teach) in the language of his own people, in order to make things clear to them". (*Ibrahim* 14:4);

— "Mankind is of one nation". (*Baqarah* 2:213);

— "O, Humanity! We created you from a single of a male and female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other)". (*Hujurat* 49:13)

— "And if thy Lord had willed, He verily would have made mankind one nation, yet they cease not differing". (*Hood* 11:118); and

—"And were it not that Allah checks the people, some by means of others, there would have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of Allah is much mentioned". (*al- Hajj* 22:40).

Moreover, by way of illustrating how the illustrious Companions of the Prophet felt or acted *vis-à-vis* other faiths a reference may be made to an example set by Hazrat Ali ®, the fourth *khalifa*. While on a walk in the evening a Companion of him after having seen Christians praying at a church remarked that *kafirs* (unbelievers) were praying. Visibly annoyed Hazrat Ali ® remonstrated: "Do not call those who pray *kafirs*". This incident may appear to be a poser to those obscurantist and fanatic Muslims who are often found to call people of other faiths *kafirs*. It may also be inferred that Islam recognizes all the praying people religionists even if there are obvious ritualistic differences in how they pray. It is also to be noted that all prayers by all religionists are directed towards one Supreme Being, even if He is addressed differently in different languages. As per the Holy Quran all the languages of the world are the creations of Allah: "He has taught him speech (and eloquence)" (*Rahman* 55: 4). In such a context, Muslims are exhorted for a benign and peaceful interfaith relationship *vis-à-vis* the followers of other religions. For example, it is revealed that, "Allah does not forbid you respecting those who have not made war against you on account of (your) religion, and have not driven you forth from your homes, that you show them kindness and deal with them justly; surely Allah loves the doers of justice. Allah only forbids you from those who fight you because of religion and expel you from your homes and aid in your expulsion – (forbids) that you make allies of them. And whoever makes allies of them, than it is those who are the wrongdoers" (*Mumtahinah* 60: 8-9).

How much and how far Islam emphasizes an inclusive and universal outlook on the part of its followers is manifested in its insistence on *ta'ruf*, meaning knowing each other or others. *Ta'ruf*

originates from the root word *Arf*, which appears in the Quranic verse *Hujurat* (49:13). *Ta'ruf* in Islam is a necessity, which is raised to being a binding rule. But that Muslims, in general, do not follow such a principle is evident from the statement of an Islamic scholar: "The need for *Ta'ruf* is deep-rooted, and what is happening is nothing but deviations of the original rules of human relations down the road of history".[2] In fact, the need to know others and the urge for the same is integral to human psyche, and Islam has simply raised this to the plane of a principle entwined with faith. Considered more comprehensively, *Ta'ruf* appears to be a philosophical rationale of divine prescription for humanity to reach out to others by every possible means, and create an order based on mutuality (not conflict) of interests and peaceful coexistence.

In the Holy Quran Allah ordains humanity in the following language: "*Tatafaqqaru fi khalqillah*" – think over all the creations of Allah, meaning Allah is omnipresent and manifest in all his creations. In one of the lectures Rabindranath Thakur in the United States titled, "The Relation of the Individual to the Universe" highlights the Upanishadic message that is similar to this Quranic commandment: "The spirit of the teachings of Upanishad is: In order to find him you must embrace all... We are enjoined to see whatever there is in the world as being enveloped by God. I bow to God over and over again who is in fire and in water, who permeates the whole world, who is in the annual crops as well as in the perennial trees".

Rabindranath, in the same lecture, refers to Buddha as having repeated the same Upanishadic message: "The being who is in his essence the light and life of all, who is world conscious, is Brahma.... This light and life, this all- feeling being is in our souls".

To these two quotes Rabindranath added his commentary buttressing the points therein from his own perspective: "Thus to attain our world-consciousness, we have to unite our feeling with this

all pervasive infinite feeling. In fact, the only true human progress is coincident with this widening of the range of feeling. All our poetry, philosophy, science, art, and religion are serving to extend the scope of our consciousness towards higher and higher spheres".

But Islam as presented above may be at variance, in most cases, with Islam of today, either in practice or politically motivated distortions. Consequently, a conscientious observer of Islam and its followers may discover a distance between the two; of course, this may be the case *vis-à-vis* any practicing faith in the contemporary world. In fact, Islam and Muslim may be apparently synonyms, but history and heritage of the both prove that they may, in most cases, be antonyms; and this is because of the difference between the faith and its practice by the followers.[3]

II

Sri Ramakrishna and Islam

Islam in origin and pristine practice as a faith as presented in this discussion certainly chime with the underlying message of Sri Ramakrishna's religious philosophy. In both cases there are common elements of pluralism and universality of religions. Both also emphasise concord, not discord when it comes to faiths and their practice by followers, who apparently divide as belonging to many faiths, but essentially unite on cores.

A person's outlook depends on his personality type and psychological make-up. So an analysis of his ideas and activities is to be based on the kind of person he is. We have a fine testimony of Sri Ramakrishna's personality from no less an authority than Max Müller, who writes: "He was a wonderful mixture of God and man. In his ordinary state he would talk of himself as servant of all men and women. He looked upon them all as God. He himself would never be addressed as Guru, or teacher. Never would he claim for himself any high position. He would touch the ground reverently

where his disciples had trodden. But every now and then strange fits of God-consciousness came upon him". It was no wonder that such a God-spirited person would put himself in the service of God and all His creations, including religions.

In 1866, Govinda Roy, a Hindu Guru who practiced *Sufism*, initiated Ramakrishna into Islam. Ramakrishna said he "devoutly repeated the name of *Allah*, wore a cloth like the Arab Muslims, said their prayer five times daily, and felt disinclined even to see images of the Hindu gods and goddesses, much less worship them – for the Hindu way of thinking had disappeared altogether from my mind". According to him, after three days of having been a Muslim he had a vision of a "radiant personage with grave countenance and white beard resembling the Prophet and merging with his body". In 1873, he had an exposure to Christianity. The extent of the impact of Islam may be found by taking into cognizance the fact that it was Ramakrishna who had exhorted Girish Chandra Sen to be the first translator of the Holy Quran into Bangla. The translation was completed between 1881 and 1886. This vernacular version of the Islamic holy book made the basics of the Islamic faith understandable to the common Muslim masses. It was indeed a substantive contribution in taking Islam to the mass level; and the catalyser of which was Ramakrishna.

Such a personality make-up and the mindset that Sri Ramakrishna was endowed with was as much the outgrowths of his inner self as these were of an intermesticity between his inner self and the socio-religious milieu in which he was born and living through. The 19th century Bengal witnessed sharp intercommunity polarization arising out of conflictual religions perceptions with consequential political complications. As it was, the Bengal of the 19th century as well as the subcontinent had to witness the inexorable process of the parting of ways between Hindus and Muslims supposedly on religious grounds. This was the supposed ground for such an unwanted historical outcome, as there could be more tangible explanation for the same

in the economic cum political divide between Hindus and Muslims created in the backdrop of an exploitative colonial domination. But, as it was, Sri Ramakrishna appeared to have concerned himself with the supposed religious ground of Hindu-Muslim dissension; and sought solution to which by addressing the cores of all religion, which, in his conviction, rule out any such conflictual interreligious milieu. Thus Sri Ramakrishna came up with a time-specific as well as time-transcending solution not only for his homeland but also for the world across. He was indeed a trail-blazer in thinking and preaching the way he did.

Another pertinent point that contextualizes Sri Ramakrishna's ideas is the one to assess him against the egalitarian and inclusive tradition of Bengal. Of the many representative instances of such a tradition reference may be made to two only. The first is what Chandidas, the folk poet of 14th century Bengal, preached: "The highest truth is the man. No truth is higher than this". Again, there was Lalon, the 18th-19th century devotional folk singer of Bengal, who used to sing aloud: "Cows are of different complexions; but their milk is of one colour". While Chandidas and Lalon had the social perspective in their minds Sri Ramakrishna had the religious one. But all of them shared the common vision of the unity and indivisibility of *Homo sapiens* as a species inhabiting this planet earth. Above all, all of them stressed convergence, not divergence of the humanity as a species. Even in the context of the Godcentric construct of the universe Sri Ramakrishna, Gautama Buddha, and Rabindranath appear to have shared a common perception and position. Thus Sri Ramakrishna, as he appears with his teachings and preachings, was very much a product of a tradition that he belonged to and circumstances he lived through.

III

Thus Sri Ramakrishna was a breed apart even amongst the saintly and religious personalities known for their inclusive and egalitarian

views and having a niche as promoters of interfaith harmony. None of them experienced religions other than their own the way Sri Ramakrishna did. Although a theoretician of religious pluralism and interfaith harmony, Sri Ramakrishna deduced his theories from personal exposures to religious variations. He found the ultimate truth common to all the religions. He found every religion as different pathways to a common destination i.e. reaching out to the Supreme Being. Another truth he imbibed was the Godliness of all humans, who are the creatures of the same Supreme Being.

Again, he agrees with the Islamic ethos insofar as Islam considers all humans *ashraful makhluqat* – the best of all creations. So his conviction was that "Creeds and sects matter nothing. Let every one perform with faith the devotions and practices of his creed. Faith is the only clue to get God". The assessment that becomes ineluctable about Ramakrishna is that he was an empiricist *vis-à-vis* religions.

Sri Ramakrishna's was a simple approach to the issues of religious tolerance and religious pluralism. Thus contrary to the common perception it is to be pointed out that he never meant to synthesize (*samanway*) religions; he simply believed in and preached for harmony of all religionists. This was a theory of interfaith harmony put into practice by his disciple Swami Vivekananda. Both of them, as I firmly believe, added a dimension to the present day democratic discourse. Democracy is all about pluralism in all spheres of life. Much has been talked about and written for political pluralism as an element of democratization. But nothing or little has so far been said of religious pluralism as another element in the democratization process. But Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda provided the recipe for religious pluralism by highlighting the truth – *Jato mat, tato path* – so many paths as there are views. To say that this was only a recipe for religious harmony would be doing an inadequate justice to these two proponents of extraordinary perception and farsightedness bearing on the issues and problems of the contemporary world.

Ramakrishna concentrated on and addressed the religious roots of human conflicts, and sought elimination of which through his empirically deduced truth common to all religions.

Conclusion

Islam today, in most cases, may appear to be at variance with the ideas of Sri Ramakrishna, but pristine Islam to which he had exposure is not. Both the pristine Islam and ideas of Sri Ramakrishna are relevant in overcoming the conflicts that keep the world disturbed and destabilized, at least, religiously. Both provide perfect recipe for conflict resolution from a religious perspective. This is, however, a recipe that awaits proper attention and consideration. It is true that of late there have been murmurings and musings on interfaith harmony. But, as it becomes obvious that the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and preachings of Swami Vivekananda had ample indications for how to achieve interfaith harmony; and which pre-date the recent such endevoures, it is worth mentioning that these teachings and preachings provide a strong antidote to Samuel Huntington's Cassandra-like prognosis of a "clash of civilizations".

Notes and References

[1] See for details Syed Anwar Husain "Islamic Perspective of Interfaith Harmony and Dialogue", paper delivered at the International Conference on Intercultural Dialogue organized jointly by Bangladesh National Commission for UNESCO, and Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in cooperation with Islamic Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, Tehran held from 7 through 9 October 2009 in Dhaka.

[2] Cited in Ibid., p. 5

[3] Syed Anwar Husain, "Islam in the Democratic Matrix", in Naveed Ahmed Tahir (ed.), *Different Facets of the Islamic Ummah in a Globalised World*, Karachi: Goethe Institute, 2006, p. 6

Sri Ramakrishna and Our Times: a Perspective from the West

Jeffery D. Long

Personal Introduction

Namaskar! I would like to begin my presentation today by first expressing my gratitude at being invited to speak at this excellent programme on the auspicious occasion of the 175th anniversary of the birth of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, whose teachings and example have transformed the lives of many spiritual seekers from the Western world, including myself. In the more than one hundred years since he was introduced to the West by his renowned disciple, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna has been a guiding light to vast numbers of seekers, both directly, through the Vedanta movement and the many Vedanta Societies established throughout North America by the monks of the Ramakrishna Order, but even more so indirectly, through the variety of both Hindu and Buddhist teachers for whom the Vedanta movement paved the way, creating a subculture in the US and other Western countries marked by openness to the wisdom of what some might perceive as "strange," "foreign," or "exotic" teachers with names like the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Paramahamsa Yogananda, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Sri Aurobindo, and Sri Ramana Maharshi, to name only a few. Behind all of these figures who have changed Western thought and life in ways both subtle and not so subtle, stands the towering figure of Swami Vivekananda, and behind Swami Vivekananda, sits the smiling figure of world teacher and avatar, Sri Ramakrishna,

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immersed in *nirvikalpa samadhi*, the infinite ocean of being, consciousness, and bliss, or *satchidananda*.

I would also like to express how honoured I feel that this, my first visit not only to Belur Math, but to Kolkata, should be for the purpose of participating in this seminar that is in honour of Sri Ramakrishna. That my very first visit to this sacred place should be in the service of Sri Ramakrishna is something that I take to be a profound blessing.

Although this is an academic presentation, I would like to request the indulgence of being allowed to begin my remarks on a personal note. This is not to draw attention to myself, but is intended, rather, to use my particular experiences as an example of the deep and ongoing relevance of Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings to people in the Western world. At the risk of exaggerating, my thesis is that an understanding of Ramakrishna's life and teachings is essential to the survival of humanity. Without the understanding, which Ramakrishna's life embodies, of the ultimate unity of all of humanity, and of all spiritual paths, the conflicts among the religions of the world, and between the world's religions and secular philosophies, combined with our increasing technological abilities, are likely to lead to the destruction of all human life, or at least of human civilization. Like a time traveller from the future, Ramakrishna represents, I believe, the next phase in the evolution of human consciousness. Ramakrishna *is* our future, if we are to have one.

My first encounter with Sri Ramakrishna was through a book on the religions of the world written by Houston Smith, a highly renowned scholar of religion who has been deeply influenced by the Vedanta tradition in North America. At one point in his career, Smith taught in St. Louis, Missouri. Smith met Swami Satprakashananda, of the Vedanta Society of St. Louis, and studied Vedanta with him. And it was Smith's account of Sri Ramakrishna that was my first encounter with this profound saint and sage.

Interestingly, I also grew up in the state of Missouri, in a small town just ninety minutes' drive from St. Louis called Montgomery City. When I read Smith's book, I was fourteen years old. I was very intensely interested in the religions of the world, and most especially Hinduism, because of the death of my father two years before. He had been in a terrible accident, which eventually led to his death. These events inspired a search for answers and for spiritual meaning behind the phenomena of suffering and death to which all living beings are subject. Why do we suffer? What happens when we die? Is there a purpose–and if so, what is it–to which all of this leads?

My search led first to an in-depth engagement with the spiritual tradition in which I grew up – that of the Roman Catholic Church. However, while I found much in Catholic teaching to comfort and inspire me, there were areas in which I found this teaching to be lacking, particularly with regard to the question of the afterlife. I was also aware that the Catholic Church, and the wider Christian tradition of which it forms a significant portion, was but one tradition among many. Had I been born in Thailand, I would be looking for answers in Buddhism. Had I been born in Saudi Arabia, I would be looking for answers in Islam. And had I been born Jewish, I would be looking for answers in the teachings of Judaism. Science, of course, is universal in a way that the world's religions are not. Its answers are available, at least in principle, to all. The results of scientific experiments are not dependent upon where one was born (though, as we have learned from quantum physics, the perspective of the observer does have a bearing on the outcome of an observation, at least in the study of subatomic particles). My questions, though, were not about subatomic particles. Questions about meaning, morality, and the destiny of the soul, however, are not scientific in nature. I therefore took it upon myself to study the teachings and the scriptures of the religions of the world, in order to have a more complete picture of humanity's wisdom in the areas

in which I was concerned. This is how I ended up reading Houston Smith's book at the age of fourteen.

Even before reading Smith's book, however, my search had led me to read works by Mahatma Gandhi, which, in turn, led me to read the *Bhagavadgita*, a copy of which I found almost miraculously at an outdoor market in the parking lot of the local Methodist Church. Though I found wisdom in the various religious works and scriptures that I was studying – the *Daodejing*, the Buddhist scriptures, the *Quran*, and of course the Bible and the works of great saints and theologians from my native tradition – it was in the *Gita* that I found a wisdom that was, to my way of thinking, comprehensive and without limitation or flaw. I especially found its teaching of karma and rebirth to be compellingly logical. Even though I was still Catholic at that time, I became, and remain, an ardent believer in reincarnation.

My searching and my personal theologizing, however, very quickly led to clashes with the very conservative Protestant Christianity that was the dominant tradition of rural Missouri, and indeed most of rural America, even today. As a Catholic in a small town in Missouri, I was already a member of a religious minority. On several occasions, I had to deal with people, even adults, who told me that I was going to hell – that I was condemned for all eternity – because of my Catholic faith. And when, in the course of conversation, it became evident that I was not only a Catholic, but a strange Catholic, who studied world religions and believed in reincarnation, my interlocutors became even more certain that I was damned for all time! Only through having faith in Jesus Christ as my personal lord and savior, as understood by conservative, evangelical Protestant Christians, could I be saved from eternal damnation.

These encounters troubled me deeply – and, in retrospect, I believe they constituted a form of child abuse. For a child, to be threatened with eternal damnation by an adult can be a traumatizing

experience. In my case, however, it was a productive trauma, for it added fuel to the fire of my spiritual quest. How, I asked myself, could the God whose nature is said in the Christian gospels to be love, condemn entire civilizations to eternal damnation simply because they followed the religious beliefs and practices that their ancestors had taught them? Were not Christians doing exactly the same thing, on a similar epistemic basis? Again, these same evangelical Protestants, had they been born in Thailand, would probably be equally ardent Theravada Buddhists. Had they been born in Saudi Arabia, they would be as convinced that the *Quran* was the word of God as they were now convinced that the word of God was to be found only in the Bible. In fact, how did they know that *they* were not going to hell? Maybe an exclusivist form of Islam was true, and the Christians were the ones going to hell. In any case, if God is love, as Christianity teaches, it seemed to me that the ways to draw nearer to Him must be many: that the path to the infinite could not be confined to one religion, culture, ethnic group, or nationality. How could the infinite be limited to one religion?

It was with such thoughts in mind that I read, in Smith's book, such quotes from the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* as, "God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up a bamboo pole... You may say that there are many errors and superstitions in another religion. I should reply: Suppose there are. Every religion has errors. Everyone thinks that his watch gives the correct time. It is enough to have yearning for God. It is enough to love Him and feel attracted to Him. ...Each religion is only a path leading to God, as rivers come from different directions and ultimately become one in the one ocean... All religions and all paths call upon their followers to pray to one and the same God. Therefore one should not show disrespect to any religion or religious opinion."[1]

My heart sang with joy when I read these words, which resonated with the similar words of Gandhi, which I had already read in the course of my search. According to the Mahatma, "Religions are different roads converging upon the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? In reality there are as many religions as there are individuals. I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. I believe that they are all God-given, and I believe that they were all necessary for the people to whom these religions were revealed. And I believe that, if only we could all of us read the scriptures of different faiths from the standpoint of the followers of those faiths, we should find that they were at bottom all one and were helpful to one another."[2]

This teaching of ultimate religious harmony – a position that I would later learn is called by scholars *religious pluralism* – seemed to be far more consistent with a God who loves everyone than the idea that entire religious communities are going to hell.

Of course, just because an idea is attractive does not make it true. It is important to test all ideas against logic and experience. Here, too, however, Ramakrishna goes even beyond Gandhi, basing his teaching of the harmony of religions on his practice of several spiritual paths, saying, "I have practiced all religions – Hinduism, Islam, Christianity – and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths... He who is called Krishna is also called Shiva, and bears the name of the Primal Energy [or Shakti], Jesus, and Allah as well – the same Ram with a thousand names."[3] On the basis of direct experience, of spiritual practice or *sadhana* undertaken from within a variety of religious traditions, Ramakrishna concludes that, "It is not good to feel that one's religion alone is true and all others are false. God is one only and not two. Different people call him by different names: some as Allah, some as God, and others as Krishna, Shiva, and

Brahman. It is like water in a lake. Some drink it at one place and call it 'jal,' others at another place and call it 'pani,' and still others at a third place and call it 'water.'...But it is one and the same thing."[4]

Though I could not, and cannot, claim to have practiced many religious paths with anything like the degree of intensity and commitment with which Ramakrishna practiced his multi-religious sadhanas, with each of his practices culminating in the experience of samadhi – of complete immersion in the *ishta devata*, or chosen ideal of divinity to which he had committed himself – his teaching certainly resonated, and still resonates, with my experience of seeking, and finding, profound wisdom in a variety of religious traditions and texts, as well as in the lives of the wonderful people of all religious backgrounds, and of no religion, whom I have encountered in the course of my journey. In the worldview of Sri Ramakrishna, there are no religions that lead to hell. All lead, like rivers, to the one ocean of bliss.

Sri Ramakrishna's Relevance to the Contemporary West

Part I: "Spiritual but not Religious"

In some ways, my spiritual journey is typical of those of many Westerners in our times, and in some ways it is not. If I may quickly take us from the fourteen-year-old Jeffery D. Long, reading the words of Ramakrishna in Houston Smith's *The Religions of Man*, to the Jeffery D. Long of today, my spiritual quest, which has also been an intellectual quest, led me through several phases. During my teenage years, I tried to reconcile my beliefs, which had an increasingly Hindu character, with the teaching of the Catholic Church. While studying theology in college, at the University of Notre Dame, I realized that my worldview was irreconcilable with that taught by the Church, and by all mainstream forms of Christianity. I then practiced, during my first two years of graduate school at the University of Chicago, a Hindu-inspired sadhana called Siddha Yoga. But I did not yet identify myself fully with any particular religious tradition.

Then I met my wife, who is Hindu by birth, and I connected much more deeply with Hindu traditions through this personal, family tie, actually becoming Hindu formally through the Arya Samaj. Finally, I have formally affiliated with the Vedanta tradition of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda through meeting Swami Tyagananda, of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Boston, about ten years ago as of this writing.

A large and growing number of Westerners, particularly in North America, have had a similar set of experiences to my own. Raised primarily in Christian, although often in Jewish, families, some kind of crisis or other profound and life-changing experience is the catalyst for their embarking upon a search and finding the traditions in which they were raised to be, in some way, lacking. This experience can be traumatic, as mine was, involving the death of a loved one, or it can be of a more intellectual nature, as some of my students have experienced upon learning for the first time about the richness and the depth of religions about which they previously knew nothing, or that they knew only in a distorted or stereotypical way, through inadequate high school courses or through images in the popular media. The spiritual seeker is a definite subset of American culture, and is one that has a growing influence on the wider culture of the entire society.

Some of these seekers, like myself, pass through a period of spiritual rootlessness, but eventually settle upon a tradition that satisfies both the soul and the intellect. Though I disagreed with many of the teachings of the Catholic Church, between the time I had ceased to identify with the Church and the time that I began to identify with Hindu Dharma, I missed being connected to a tradition and a community. Simply practicing on my own, as a spiritual free agent, left something to be desired. I now identify the missing element with the *guru-shakti*, the spiritual power that goes back, through one's teacher, to an enlightened being or avatar, like Sri Ramakrishna or Jesus Christ. In the Roman

Catholic tradition in which I was raised, the power of a transmitted spiritual lineage is affirmed in the idea of apostolic succession, according to which all of the popes and bishops of the Catholic Church can be traced, through an unbroken lineage of ordination, back to Jesus and his original twelve disciples – and in the case of the popes, specifically back to the apostle Peter. In the tradition of Ramakrishna, this transmission of course occurs through the monks of the Ramakrishna Order, and is traced ultimately to the Holy Mother Sarada Devi, and finally to Ramakrishna himself.

A large and growing number of Western spiritual seekers, however, choose not to affiliate themselves to any tradition at all, continuing to practice as, to return to the phrase I just used, spiritual free agents. The term that most of these people use for themselves, in fact, is "spiritual but not religious." So pervasive is this term becoming, in fact, that a new acronym, SBNR, has been coined among some scholars of religion to designate this group. Religion scholar and author Robert C. Fuller describes SBNRs in the following way: "Forsaking formal religious organizations, these people have instead embraced an individualized spirituality that includes picking and choosing from a wide range of alternative religious philosophies. They typically view spirituality as a journey intimately linked with the pursuit of personal growth or development."[5]

Because they constitute, by their very nature, a highly decentralized and difficult to define group, estimates of the percentage of the US population that falls into the SBNR category vary wildly. Journalist Philip Goldberg estimates that "SBNRs make up 16 to 39 percent of the population" of the United States today.[6] (Incidentally, a few of my own students assisted Goldberg in transcribing data for the book from which this estimate is drawn. The book is entitled: *American Veda: From Emerson to the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation – How Indian Spirituality Changed the West.* Goldberg interviewed me for this book, the foreword of which was written by none other than Houston Smith.)

It is very important to distinguish this group, the Spiritual but not Religious, from skeptics. We are not talking here about atheism, or the rejection of religion in its totality, but about a rejection of religious organizations and institutions as anything other than, at most, a necessary evil – a means to an end, that end being a highly personal realization that is not limited to any particular tradition, scripture, practice, or teacher. What the Spiritual but not Religious phenomenon points to is something that, arguably, has been an integral part of Indian spirituality for millennia, and that the life of Sri Ramakrishna embodies to an extraordinary degree – arguably to its human limits: a path to meaning, wholeness, and happiness that is free to draw upon a variety of traditional resources. We are talking, in short, about spiritual eclecticism.

If we take such eclecticism and the philosophy and theology that underlie it to be a distinguishing mark of Hinduism, one could argue that, although most of them they do not identify themselves in this way, a growing number of Americans – the Spiritual but not Religious – are Hindu: in attitude and approach to the spiritual life, if not in name. This claim could be supported by the fact that many of the beliefs and sources upon which this population draws are, in fact, Hindu. My own grasp of this fact, coupled with a desire to identify with a tradition, is part of why I began to identify myself as Hindu long ago.

I am not the only person to observe this fact. It was also noted in a controversial editorial for *Newsweek* magazine on August 31, 2009 titled "We Are All Hindus Now." In this editorial the author, Lisa Miller, cites polling data that indicates that a staggering 65 percent of Americans believe that "many religions can lead to eternal life" – *yato mat, tato path* – including a surprising 37 percent of white evangelical Christians. (Not, I think, people I grew up with!) The same data indicates that 24 percent of Americans believe in reincarnation, and that 30 percent identify themselves as Spiritual but not Religious.[7]

I cannot speak for Lisa Miller, but I know that my own identification of spiritual eclecticism with Hinduism is, in part, an historical observation, but that it also stems from my desire to be spiritually eclectic while at the same time identifying with an established spiritual tradition – one that allows, and is indeed arguably defined by, such eclecticism.

It is significant, however, that the Spiritual but not Religious have made a choice *not* to identify themselves as Hindu – even those with beliefs and practices that are, for all intents and purposes, identical to beliefs and practices Hindus have followed for many centuries, and indeed, for millennia. I analyzed this fact in a paper that I presented for the Dharma Academy of North America, or DANAM, in 2008 that was titled "Hindu – To Be or Not to Be: Three Possible Reasons for Aversion to the Term 'Hindu' among Western Practitioners." One of the reasons that I found for this aversion was cultural prejudice. It is sadly the case that even among those who are open to ideas and spiritual practices from a variety of traditions and cultural points of origin, ethnocentrism and even subtle forms of racism are still visible. The term *Hinduism* is identified, in the minds of many, with what independent scholar Rajiv Malhotra has famously called "caste, cows, and curry," a clever alliterative shorthand for all of that which is seen, from a certain kind of Western perspective, to be exotic, strange, and backward about Indian culture. The deep truths of Vedanta and the practice of yoga, on the other hand, are de-Indianized and universalized.

This is not, however, the entire story. The most important reason, from their own point of view, that the Spiritual but not Religious do not identify themselves as Hindu is because they do wish to identify themselves with *any* religious label whatsoever. From their point of view, to label is to limit. To identify oneself with a particular religion or a specific tradition is to cut oneself off from the spiritual resources that might be offered in other religious traditions. This understanding is an effect, one could argue, of the ways in which

religion is traditionally conceptualized in the West. According to the dominant, or at least until recently dominant, understanding of religion in the West, religion is an all or nothing proposition. One is either Catholic or Protestant or Jewish or Muslim or atheist. The idea that one could be more than one thing – that one could be Christian *and* Hindu, or Jewish *and* Buddhist, or, as many practitioners have been for centuries in both Japan and China, a practitioner of both Buddhism *and* Shinto, or of Buddhism, Confucianism, *and* Daoism – is utterly foreign to most Americans. It does not occur to them. So if one wants to have an eclectic spirituality, a spirituality that is not limited to the resources of any one tradition, one becomes, as we have been saying, spiritual but not religious, on the view that to be religious is to identify with just one tradition, exclusively. The idea that there might be a religion, such as Hinduism, that is compatible with spiritual eclecticism is not a well known or widespread idea – or is viewed with suspicion, as an attempt to lure one to Hinduism, when one would really rather be free of any limiting labels.

Again, my own preference for identifying with Hinduism is due in part to my own wish to have my cake and eat it too: to feel connected with a tradition while being free and even encouraged to pursue my spiritual eclecticism. But I think there is a wisdom in what the Spiritual but not Religious are saying, even if it is based on a fairly narrow view of just what religion and religious affiliation entail. And indeed, it is a wisdom that I see as coming directly from the teaching of Sri Ramakrishna; for Ramakrishna did *not* teach that everyone should become Hindu, or that everyone was already implicitly Hindu, due to their being on the spiritual path.

On the contrary, if the life of Ramakrishna means anything it is that identities and labels are ultimately meaningless, and are indeed potential obstructions to seeing the truth of the Self, which is the same within all. The Atman is not Hindu or Buddhist or Muslim or Christian. It is all of these and none of these. It is the transcendent reality of who and what we truly are. It is That which we strive to

realize, not our Christian-ness, Buddhist-ness, Muslim-ness, nor even our Hindu-ness. All these labels are an effect of our taking birth at a particular time, in a particular place, as I realized in Missouri all those years ago. They are not who we truly are, much less what we are striving to attain. They have only a provisional utility. They are, to use the proper Vedantic term, *upadhis*, or limiting attributes which conceal the infinite reality that is our true nature. Ramakrishna proved this, if we are to believe his own accounts of his experiences, by realizing the same reality, the same ultimate truth, the same God, in the ideals and through the practices of a variety of religious traditions. Was Ramakrishna a Vaishnava, a Shaiva, a Shakta? Was he a Hindu, a Christian, a Muslim? Yes, to all of the above – and no, for how can the infinite be contained in any one of these limited, finite identities?

Swami Vivekananda was very clear on this point, when explaining that following the spiritual path was not about switching one limiting label for another, but rather about following whatever religion, whatever version of the spiritual path one was following, in a sincere and dedicated manner, but with respect and openness toward all others as well. In his words, "Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid... The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth."[8]

It is fair to say, I think, through the transmission of his teachings to the West, first by Swami Vivekananda, and then through the diffusion of Vedantic ideals that followed, both through the efforts of the Vedanta Societies and their adherents – lay and monastic – and the host of other teachers and seekers for whom Swamiji paved the way, that one of the major impacts of Sri Ramakrishna on Western culture today is the spread of spiritual eclecticism. The growing

number of Americans who identify themselves as Spiritual but not Religious are, whether they know it or not, his children. One could debate whether by steadfastly refusing to identify themselves with any particular tradition, they might be depriving themselves of important spiritual resources; for Ramakrishna also did *not* say, "Practice no religion." He said love all. Respect all. Be open to all. At the same time, those of us who do identify our spiritual eclecticism with the Hindu tradition are given a reminder by these principled non-joiners to avoid Hindu chauvinism. We may wish to be mindful that the very eclecticism on which we pride ourselves can itself become a way for the ego to assert its superiority over the other, and to congratulate itself for how wonderfully tolerant and open-minded it is, unlike the other toward which it claims to be open and tolerant. It is a lesson I believe Ramakrishna would want his devotees to take to heart.

Sri Ramakrishna's Relevance to the Contemporary West

Part II: Saving the World

The number 108 has very deep significance in the spiritual traditions of India. Appearing repeatedly in the stories, texts, and practices of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. Its sanctity is illustrated, for example, by the fact that a *mala*, or string of prayer beads, is made up of 108 beads on a thread, with a 109th symbolizing Mount Meru, and not being numbered among the beads on which one keeps count of one's *mantra* while meditating.

On September 11, 1893, Swami Vivekananda delivered his famous first address to the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, in which he declared his fervent hope that fanaticism and intolerance would soon be brought to an end.

Exactly 108 years later, on September 11, 2001, an event occurred in the history of my country, and in world history, which is likely to be remembered as a victory for the very forces of fanaticism and intolerance for whose end Swamiji had so fervently hoped.

I remember the day quite vividly. I was teaching an Indian Philosophy class that morning in which I was explaining to my students the concept of *pramana*. Distracted by a growing gathering of students in the classroom across the corridor, which was equipped with a television set, I ended my class and my students and I went to see what seemed to be capturing the attention of so many people. We entered the room and began watching the television just in time to see the collapse of the twin towers in New York City, as well as hearing of the attack on the Pentagon and the plane that had crashed in Pennsylvania, not all that far from where we were.

At this point, my wife and I were in our second year of teaching at Elizabethtown College. Just fifteen months earlier, I had received my doctoral degree from the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, for which I had written a dissertation titled *Plurality and Relativity: Whitehead, Jainism, and the Reconstruction of Religious Pluralism*. I was in the course of building upon the argument of my dissertation and developing what, in a few more years, would become my first book, *A Vision for Hinduism*.

The point of my dissertation, as well as my first book and many of the articles that I have written subsequently, was to develop a persuasive philosophical argument for Sri Ramakrishna's teaching of the harmony of religions, or religious pluralism; for while, on an intuitive level, I see this teaching as articulating a profound and important truth, it is a teaching that also raises a host of difficult questions.

I have taken addressing these questions to be my central task as a theologian and a philosopher of religion in the tradition of Vedanta as taught by Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda; for I am persuaded, as I mentioned at the start of this presentation, that it is vital to the future survival of humanity that we find a way to see religious difference in a way that respects the distinctness of each tradition while also affirming the unity of all.

On that September morning in 2001, though, I almost despaired. Returning to my office after finding my wife and making sure that she was all right and knew about what had happened, I found my just barely begun book manuscript, on which I had planned to work that day, and was struck by what seemed to be the futility and the hubris of the task I had set for myself. Would anything I could ever say or write bring back the thousands who died on September 11th? Or fill the holes in the lives of their families? How could a book or a dissertation or a conference or a seminar or a curriculum even begin to respond to the pain that had erupted into the world on that day, or the hate that had created it? I closed my eyes to meditate, and as my mind gradually became calm, the thought arose. "Now, more than ever, you need to write this book. You have a *responsibility* to write it. If any good can come out of it at all, you must do it. You must speak the truth as you see it."

In addition to, and in part connected with, the phenomenon of the Spiritual but not Religious, the other major impact of Sri Ramakrishna on the West has been in the form of his teaching of the harmony of religions. A version of this idea had already arisen in the Western world in the form of the Unitarian and Universalist movements – which have now merged into a single association – as well as in some iterations of the wider movement of modernity itself, known as the Enlightenment, in which reason and experience gradually came to substitute for church authority as guides to the truth. The early modern author, Michel de Montaigne, who lived from 1533 to 1592, famously wrote, "We are Christians by the same title that we are Perigordians or Germans."[9] He was acknowledging, in other words, that one's religious affiliation is as much an accident of birth as one's nationality. How, then, could anyone be condemned by a just God for practicing the religion of one's birth? The Unitarian movement, influenced, through one of its most celebrated American adherents, Ralph Waldo Emerson, by Hindu thought, affirmed the basic goodness of all.[10]

Universalism, finally, was a current within Christian thought which affirmed that the love of God, being infinite and unconditional, could tolerate the damnation of none of His children, and that all would eventually be saved, no matter what their religious belief.

It was with Sri Ramakrishna's teaching of the harmony of religions, however, as transmitted by Swami Vivekananda, that this idea began to take firm hold in the Western world. Its pre-eminent advocate in the early and mid-twentieth century was philosopher and author Aldous Huxley, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda and a British expatriate who settled in California and, along with his colleague, Christopher Isherwood, became a major fixture at the Vedanta Society of Southern California. Huxley's classic work, *The Perennial Philosophy*, defends the ideal of the harmony of religions by arguing that there is a shared core of experiential wisdom at the heart of all the world's religious traditions, whose texts he quotes quite liberally in order to prove the existence of "the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being."[11]

Huxley's approach, widely known as *perennialism*, had a strong influence upon a range of prominent philosophers, theologians, and scholars of religion, including Houston Smith (who was mentioned previously) and John Hick.

John Hick took Huxley's approach and sought to improve upon it, developing it into a full-blown systematic philosophy of religion. One of the main criticisms of Huxley is that the scriptural texts that he cites from the world's religions are often taken out of context, making the world's religions appear more convergent and harmonious than they, in fact, often are. Hick replaces this approach with his "pluralistic hypothesis."[12]

Hick–again, very much intellectually in the lineage of Huxley, Vivekananda, and ultimately, Ramakrishna – proposes what he calls a "Copernican revolution" in the ways in which religious traditions see themselves in relation to truth and ultimate reality. Just as people in medieval Europe widely believed that the earth was the centre of the universe, around which the sun revolved, being convinced only gradually by Copernicus' view that the earth is just one planet among many revolving around the sun, Hick similarly claims that religions traditionally identify themselves with the truth, in terms of which all other religions are to be measured and either found praiseworthy or, all too often, wanting. But in place of this medieval model, Hick claims that the awareness that there is wisdom and goodness to be found in many religions, and that all religions, including one's own, have been used to justify evils such as war, slavery, persecution, and the oppression of women, should lead us to see our own religion as just one more "planet" circling around the "sun" of the truth that shines upon all, to varying degrees and in varying ways.

Unfortunately – and I will spare you the technicalities given the limitations of time and the scope of this paper – Hick's approach does not allow us to say with any specificity just what the truth is, or might be. He essentially states that the nature of ultimate reality cannot be known, other than the fact that it transforms those who encounter it in all kinds of positive ways, and thus leads to the emergence of the many great saints and sages of the world's religious traditions. Ultimate reality, Hick says, "cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive. None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of experience can literally apply to the unexperienceable ground of that realm."[13]

In one sense, Hick appears to be onto a very profound truth. In his *neti neti* way, he seems to be talking about *nirguna Brahman* – that is, the highest reality that is beyond all *upadhis*, all limiting and differentiating qualities.

At the same time, though, Hick denies that ultimate reality can be experienced as it truly is by those in human form. According to Hick, the Real can be experienced only phenomenally, as structured by human consciousness. This, however, is directly contrary to the experience of Sri Ramakrishna and numerous other sages, of whom it is believed that they did, indeed, transcend the realm of *nama-rupa*, or name and form, to experience ultimate reality as it truly is, in its true nature. Any attempt to teach those who have not had this experience of course requires the teacher to resort to that with which his listeners are familiar, unless one takes a purely negative, *neti neti* approach, as some of the sages of the *Upanishads* do, and as does the Buddha. But to say that one never does go beyond the realm of name and form, at least in this life, is to deny the experiences of many of the sages of the world's religions – the very sages whose teachings the pluralistic hypothesis is intended to affirm. It also denies the experience of contemporary practitioners who have achieved this very state of transcendence. See, for example, the works of Robert Forman on what he calls "pure consciousness events."

If one does not take Hick's approach, however, deferring both the ultimate truth and the nature of the Real to the realm of "eschatological verification" (that is, the idea that we will finally know the truth of all of these things after we die), one is left with the greatest difficulty that Ramakrishna's religious pluralism raises: namely, the question of how it is that many different religions, all making different truth claims, can all be true in some sense, and lead to the same ultimate goal, even when they conceive of their goals in radically different terms?

Again, sparing my audience the technical details due to the limitations of time, it is this question that I have made the centrepiece of my work in the field of the philosophy of religion. I have tapped into an eclectic variety of sources, in the spirit of Ramakrishna, in order to defend and re-articulate his teaching of the harmony of

religions, such as the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and traditional Jain metaphysics.

Briefly, my claim is that, beyond the teachings and practices that they share, that have been illustrated by Huxley and the perennialists, the *differences* among the world's religions also include truths that are deeply significant and that allow for the possibility of their learning from one another. Affirming, with Hick, that all religions have the ability to transform their practitioners in positive ways, I also wish to affirm that it is possible to experience ultimate reality in its true nature, as Ramakrishna did, and as other sages have as well. Rather than saying that ultimate reality is inexperienceable and the ultimate truth unknowable, I argue, rather, that ultimate reality lends itself to – that is, its nature is such that it is amenable to – being experienced in a variety of ways which are all true, but none of which is comprehensive: in short, that ultimate reality is complex.

Ramakrishna points us toward this complexity when he affirms that the polar opposites of reality as these are seen in various traditions – the active, relative form of divinity as a personal reality and the impersonal absolute beyond time and space – are one and the same. Both *Lila* and *Nitya*, relative and absolute, are one Reality. "Kali is verily Brahman and Brahman is verily Kali. It is one and the same Reality. When we think of It as inactive...we call it Brahman."[14] When we think of It as active, we call it Kali, or Krishna, or Jesus, or any of the various names of the divine Person to whom the world's various religions relate.

Pravrajika Vrajaprana develops a metaphor that illustrates this perspective. In her words, "The world's spiritual traditions are like different pieces in a giant jigsaw puzzle: each piece is different and each piece is essential to complete the whole picture. Each piece is to be honoured and respected while holding firm to our own particular piece of the puzzle. We can deepen our own spirituality and learn about our own tradition by studying other faiths. Just as

importantly, by studying our own tradition well, we are better able to appreciate the truth in other traditions."[15]

Conclusion

Sri Ramakrishna's importance for our times cannot be exaggerated. On the basis of his direct, experiential awareness of ultimate reality through the matrices provided by various spiritual traditions, it is possible to develop a pluralistic approach to truth that draws upon the insights of a vast array of human religious experience, as well as upon the findings of modern science and of secular philosophies. Here, I have only been able to give a rough, evocative outline of this way of thinking. But it is a way of thinking that I believe is an essential – a necessary, but probably not sufficient – condition for bringing about a lasting peace among the various warring systems of belief that compete and struggle for survival in our world today. If we can begin to see one another, not as the other, but as fellow travellers on the spiritual path, who are pursuing the same ultimate goal in our own ways, we might be able to go some distance toward a more peaceful and habitable world. Other issues need addressing as well, such as social justice, the scarcity of resources, and the ecological crisis that is of vital concern to all. If humanity's conflicts are ever resolved, though, Sri Ramakrishna's life and teaching will certainly be a part of that resolution.

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[11] Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009, p. vii

[12] This hypothesis is most fully developed in his Gifford Lectures, published as *An Interpretation of Religion*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989.

[13] Hick, p. 246

[14] Nikhilananda, pp. 134-135

[15] Pravrajika Vrajaprana, *Vedanta: A Simple Introduction*, Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1999, pp. 56-57

Sri Ramakrishna and Our Times

Swami Bhajanananda

It is well known that great men teach not only through words but also through the life they live. Their message is inseparable from their life. Therefore, in our discussion on 'Sri Ramakrishna and Our Times', we have to consider Sri Ramakrishna's life as well as his message and understand their relevance and significance in modern times.

The life of Sri Ramakrishna reminds us of Stephen Spender's famous poem which begins with the following lines:

> "I think continually of men who were truly great,
> Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history
> Through corridors of light, where the hours are suns endless and singing."

Great men like Sri Ramakrishna come to the earth through eternity's corridors of light. Ordinary people like us are born through corridors of darkness; we are born out of compulsion, driven by our Karma, according to the Indian theory of birth. World teachers and prophets like Sri Ramakrishna are born out of their own free will. And, as Stephen Spender says, they remember from the womb the soul's history. Their soul's history is the story of living in 'eternity's sun rise' full of joy. We can see the truth of this statement in Sri Ramakrishna's life. He was fully aware that he was born with a mission in life. From his boyhood he appeared to be in charge of his own life. He refused to live according to the dictates of other people.

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In a book, *The Lonely Crowd*, published more than fifty years ago, David Riesman classifies people into four groups: *tradition-directed, other-directed, inner-directed,* and the *autonomous individual.* Tradition-directed people are the priests, Mullahs and orthodox people in all religions. Other-directed people are always guided by the dictates and advice of other people. Inner-directed people are the introverted people who are driven by their own desires, moods and whims. The autonomous individual is one who is liberated from passions and prejudices, who has a mature and holistic view of life and follows an independent course of life, being guided by his own higher wisdom.

Sri Ramakrishna remained a fully autonomous individual all through his life. In his boyhood he refused to undergo the formal 'bread-winning education' (*chal-kola bandha vidya*, as it is known in Bengali). But he prepared himself well for his future work. For twelve long years he remained absorbed in following various spiritual disciplines. After the completion of his *Sadhana* he began to go out and meet the eminent spiritual and social leaders of those days such as Dayananda Saraswati, Maharshi Davendranath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and others, and gained first-hand knowledge of their charismatic leadership qualities.

Sri Ramakrishna was not a reclusive ascetic who shunned the company of people. On the contrary, he welcomed everyone with open arms. His room was always open, and anybody could visit him at any time. His sense of mission in life gave him a sense of commitment to the people who went to him. Nobody who went to him ever returned without receiving something by way of blessing, inspiration, awakening or guidance from him. Drawn by his spiritual power and selfless love, people belonging to different walks of life, classes, castes and creeds went to him, and many of them became his disciples. He guided his householder disciples to follow the spiritual ideal without neglecting their duties. United by his love, they formed the nucleus of a new spiritual community which now numbers several millions. Along with that Sri Ramakrishna trained

a group of young men to become monks and, after his passing away, they formed a new monastic order known as the Ramakrishna Math.

His actions make it clear that he worked in accordance with a divine plan. By merging his ego in the cosmic Person, whom he regarded as the Divine Mother of the Universe, he became a channel for the flow of Divine Grace in the form of divine knowledge, divine love, divine power and divine joy for the people who came under his influence. Words of wisdom flowed from his mouth spontaneously. These words have the significance and power of a Divine Revelation, like the verbal revelations made by other world teachers like Buddha, Jesus and others. Sri Ramakrishna's inner being was cast in the mould of a world prophet or Avatara or Incarnation. According to Swami Vivekananda, a great Teacher or Prophet appears on some part or other of the globe at intervals of five hundred years.

Message of Sri Ramakrishna

It should be pointed out here that in this discourse Sri Ramakrishna is treated as a World Teacher, and not as an Avatara. (The Avatarhood of Sri Ramakrishna has been treated separately by the present author elsewhere.)

A World Teacher comes with a message suited to the needs of the age in which he is born. He does not merely teach as an ordinary teacher does. He first lives the message before delivering it and energizes with the power of his realizations and sets up powerful spiritual currents which sustain his message for centuries. Regarding this Swami Vivekananda says: 'Mere (human) thoughts are like little wavelets; fresh impulses to vibration come to them simultaneously, until at last one great wave seems to stand up and swallow up the rest. These universal thought waves seem to recur every five hundred years, when invariably, the great wave typifies and swallows up the others. It is this which constitutes a prophet. He focuses in his own mind the thought of the age in which he is living, and gives it back to mankind in concrete form.'[1]

When we read the lives of Buddha, Jesus and other world teachers, we find that they all had the full confidence that they had a new and unique message for the good of humanity. This is true of Sri Ramakrishna also. He was fully aware that he had a distinct and unique message to deliver and he articulated his message in a consistent, logical conceptual framework with great clarity and force.

The fact that he did not have more than two or three years of formal schooling did not prevent him from acquiring knowledge and wisdom through informal ways. As a matter of fact, psychological, psychoanalytical, phenomenological and educational studies conducted during the last hundred years have shown that a major part of the total knowledge of a person comes through informal, nonconscious, embodied experience. The 18th century philosopher Rousseau regarded Life itself as a teacher. Sri Ramakrishna got all his knowledge directly from Life which he identified with the Divine Mother. By directly communing with the transcendent levels of consciousness, he became a vast storehouse of knowledge and wisdom. However, he also acquired a correct understanding of Hindu scriptures from his teachers like Bhairavi Brahmani and Totapuri, and by listening to the talks of wandering ascetics and pilgrims and the discourses of scholars.

What is remarkable about Sri Ramakrishna's message is that, unlike other world teachers who followed only one path, Sri Ramakrishna followed different spiritual paths and philosophical thought currents. Out of the mosaic of spiritual experiences and knowledge that he gained, he developed a unique integral philosophy of his own. Some scholars, especially Western scholars like Heinrich Zimmer, hold that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy belongs to the Shakta tradition. But careful study can reveal that it belongs to the Vedantic tradition. Sri Ramakrishna came in the line of great Vedantic teachers like the Upanishadic sages, Sri Krishna, Acharya Shankara and others. Nevertheless, Sri Ramakrishna's message constitutes a distinct

and unique system of thought within the Vedantic tradition. He accepted as true not only Advaita Vedanta but also other schools of Vedanta. Hence his message may be called "Integral Vedanta." There is, however, something more to it. Sri Ramakrishna accepted not only Vedanta, but also other religious traditions. No other Vedanta Teacher has ever done this. Hence Sri Ramakrishna's message may be regarded as "Universal Vedanta" or Universal Religion.

Before discussing the relevance of Sri Ramakrishna's message to the present-day world situation and its significance for common people in modern times, it is necessary to identify its main concepts. There are about eight of these concepts which deserve special attention. These are: Direct Experience as the proof of Ultimate Reality, Integral view of Reality, Integral view of personality, Integral philosophy of love, Philosophy of harmony, Stress on purity of mind, Positive outlook on Life, and Philosophy of spiritual fulfilment. These eight basic tenets of Sri Ramakrishna are briefly discussed below.

1. Direct Experience as the Proof of the Ultimate Reality

All the six systems of Hindu philosophy accept three *Pramanas* or 'means of valid cognition' or 'proofs'. These are perception (*pratyaksha*), inference (*anumana*), and verbal testimony (*shabda*). All the schools also agree that the first two Pramanas, perception and inference, apply only in the field of empirical experience. In the case of transcendental experience, *shabda* or verbal testimony is the only means and proof of valid knowledge.

In Vedanta the ultimate Reality is regarded as Atman-Brahman. According to Shankara, knowledge of Brahman is of two kinds: *astitva-jnana* or knowledge of the existence of the Atman, and *svarupa jnana*, knowledge of the true nature of Brahman. According to Shankara, the first one, existence of Atman-Brahman, is self-evident, for everyone spontaneously knows that he exists; it does not need any other proof. But *svarupa-jnana*, the true nature of Brahman, can be known only from Vedantic scriptures. This is also

more or less the view held by other Vedantic Acharyas or teachers. This is where Sri Ramakrishna differs from all the Acharyas.

For the modern man there is great difficulty in accepting the view of Shankara and other Acharyas that the real nature of the Ultimate Reality or God can be known only from the scriptures. The Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads and the Gita, contain different views of the Ultimate Reality. Which view is correct? These passages have been interpreted in different ways by different Acharyas. Which of their interpretations is correct? Moreover, the scriptures of other religions like Buddhist Tripitakas, Bible, Quran etc give different views of the Ultimate Reality.

In this conflicting situation Sri Ramakrishna's view that the Ultimate Reality can be known only through direct transcendent experience provides the only satisfactory and convincing approach to the Ultimate Reality for the modern man.

2. Integral View of Reality

Sri Ramakrishna held that the Ultimate Reality is only one, but manifests Itself in multi-dimensional ways, and he accepted all the dimensions of Reality. He accepted both the *saguna* or Personal and *nirguna* or Impersonal aspects of Brahman. He accepted the Forms of God as well as the Formless (*nirākāra*), the Transcendent as well as the Immanent, the relative (which he called *lila*) and the Absolute (which he called *nitya*). This integral view of Reality has important significance in the modern world. Human knowledge has now multiplied so much, and incessant seeking and research are opening up so many avenues of knowledge, that the modern man now has to live in an extremely complex and boundless world of which he has very little understanding. The integral view of Reality developed by Sri Ramakrishna is of much help in orienting oneself to the complexities of life.

Traditional Vedantic teachers stressed the transcendent aspect of

the Ultimate Reality. Advaita teachers have spent all their intellectual powers to prove the illusoriness of the world. Such a world view does not appeal to modern youths. India is now poised to become an economic power in the world. Thousands of opportunities for creativity, achievement and fulfilment are now open to our youths. To be told about the illusoriness of the world would be most discouraging and unacceptable to them.

Sri Ramakrishna stressed the immanence of the ultimate Reality. He combined the path of negation taught by Advaitins and the path of affirmation taught by the dualistic devotional schools. First, by following the negative process of *neti, neti* ('not this, not this') one strives to realize the transcendent aspect of the Ultimate Reality, known as Brahman. After attaining the highest non-dualistic experience, the illumined soul returns to ordinary life and, by following the affirmative process of *iti, iti*, he realizes the immanence of Brahman in the whole creation. Put in simpler language, he sees God in all beings. The whole life now appears transfigured, divinized, to his illumined vision. He sees the unfolding of divine joy, beauty and other glories of God everywhere. Above all, he sees God in all human beings, and this transforms his whole attitude towards humanity.

Sri Ramakrishna called this integral experience *vijnana*, and the fully illumined soul a *vijnani*. This is an idea and ideal which has great significance in modern times. This leads us to the next main concept in Sri Ramakrishna's message.

3. Integral Concept of Personality

To look upon oneself as the Atman or Spirit and to see the Supreme Spirit in all people brings about the spiritual transformation of one's whole life. But this is a time-consuming process and may take several years. In this context the question arises, what is the role of the ego in this transformation process? What is the place of the ego in Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy?

As the eminent thinker and philospher of the 20th century India, K. C. Bhattacharya has pointed out, illusoriness of the individual self or ego is a central concept in Advaita Vedanta.[2] The concept of illusoriness of ego raises some philosophical questions which are difficult to answer. Apart from that, if the ego is illusory, then all efforts at self-improvement, development of personality, education, striving for success – everything becomes meaningless.

A well-developed ego is necessary to face the problems of life, to attain success in life, to render service to others, even to attain Mukti or liberation. Therefore Sri Ramakrishna has given an important place to ego in his philosophy. He speaks of two kinds of ego: the *kāncā āmi* or 'unripe' ego and the *pākā āmi* or 'ripe' ego. The unripe ego is the ignorant ego which is overcome by pride and selfishness. This type of ego is the cause of all our defects, difficulties, failures and sufferings. It is also a major obstacle to spiritual progress. One cannot enter a room if the door is blocked by the big bole of a tree. In the same way, ego prevents one from entering the spiritual chamber of the heart. Rainwater does not accumulate at the tip of an elevated place but flows down the slopes. In the same way, says Sri Ramakrishna, Divine grace does not remain with an egoistic person. Sri Ramakrishna identifies *avidyā māyā* with the 'unripe' ego which prevents a person from knowing his true nature as Atman.[3]

The 'ripe' ego is the ego illumined by knowledge. Such an ego makes a person regard himself as a servant of God, or as an instrument in the hands of God. He says, 'I am the engine and thou art the operator'. Sri Ramakrishna associated *vidyā māyā* or higher maya with the 'ripe' ego. He said: 'Even after attaining jnana, the jnani can live in the world retaining Vidya maya, that is to say, bhakti, compassion, renunciation and such virtues.... The 'ego of knowledge' and the 'ego of devotion' can do no harm.... It is like a burnt rope, which appears to be a rope but disappears at the slightest puff.'[4] The 'ripe' or illumined ego sees God in all people and serves them.

The transfiguration of the unawakened selfish ego into an awakened, illumined ego devoted to the service of God in man—this was what Sri Ramakrishna conceived as human development in spiritual life.

4. Positive Outlook on Life

Religion is often associated with negative attitude towards life. The negative attitude finds expression in two ways. One way is to give too much importance to suffering, evil, disease and other negative aspects of life, and to look upon the world as a prison, hell or illusion. In India it was Buddhism which introduced such an attitude into Indian culture. Before Buddha, the Upanishads and the Gita stressed the positive side of life. The Upanishadic sages saw *ananda*, joy, everywhere. Under the influence of Buddhism the Advaita philosophers also popularized the negative attitude towards life. Sri Ramakrishna saw *ananda* everywhere. He did not look upon the world as an illusion. He saw the whole world throbbing with divine consciousness, power and joy. He restored the original positive attitude of Vedic sages in modern times.

The second way the negative attitude finds expression is the self-condemning attitude, to look upon oneself as a sinner or as a useless, worthless, hopeless fellow. Sri Ramakrishna never liked or encouraged such an attitude. He used to say: 'The wretch who constantly says "I am bound, I am bound" only succeeds in becoming bound. He who says day and night "I am a sinner, I am a sinner" verily becomes a sinner. One should have such a burning faith in God that one can say: "What? I have taken the name of God, and can sin still cling to me? How can I be a sinner any more? How can I be in bondage anymore?"'[5]

This positive attitude towards oneself was developed further by Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji exhorted everyone to have faith in oneself. It is this positive attitude towards oneself that the present-day youths need most.

5. Integral Philosophy of Human and Divine Love

For Sri Ramakrishna the experience of God is not merely of the nature of Knowledge *(jnāna)* but also of the nature of Love. At the highest transcendent level, Knowledge and Love, Jnana and Bhakti, become one. He used to say: 'The Reality is one and the same.... He is Brahman to the followers of the path of Knowledge, Paramatman to the Yogis, and Bhagavan to the lovers of God.' Furthermore, Sri Ramakrishna looked upon human love as an expression of Divine Love.

There are different conceptions of love. Some Hindu teachers have taken it as an expression of divine ananda or joy, some others have explained it as an expression of higher knowledge. According to Swami Vivekananda, love is an expression of the unity, oneness of existence. The Upanishads speak of unity at two levels; at the level of Prana and at the transcendent level of the Atman.

Unity at the level of Prana is what appears as love in the world. The love of parents, the love of husband and wife, the love among friends, colleagues – all this is the expression of the sense of identification at the level of Prana. However, with notable exceptions, this kind of love is limited, conditional, unstable, impermanent and causes bondage and very often much suffering.

The Upanishads speak of unity at the transcendent level of the Atman. In the famous conversation in the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad*, the sage Yājnavalkya tells his wife Maitreyi: 'The husband is loved not for the sake of the husband but for the sake of the indwelling Supreme Self, and so on.' What Yājnavalkya speaks of is divine love. It is boundless, unconditional, everlasting and all-satisfying. It liberates men and women from bondage. This noble idea, however, remained in the scriptures unavailable to common people for many centuries. It was Sri Ramakrishna who rediscovered it, applied it in his own life, and taught it to modern people.

In the Indian religious tradition love for human beings had been regarded as a cause of bondage and an obstacle to love for God. Even Buddha warned against *priti* or love and encouraged only *maitri* (*metta*) or friendliness. Sri Ramakrishna removed the barrier between love for human beings and love for God. He was one of the greatest lovers of humanity and God the world has seen. That is why Swamiji described him as Premarpana, one who gave his love to the world.

True love finds expression in service. Here again Sri Ramakrishna removed the barriers between service to man and service to God, and combined the two into one path, the path of 'service to man as God' *(Shiva-jnāne jiva-sevā)* or service to God in man. This idea became the basis of Swami Vivekananda's gospel of social service.

6. Philosophy of Harmony

Sri Ramakrishna is most well known for his message of harmony of religions. Apart from harmony of religions, he also taught several other types of harmony.

Sri Ramakrishna's Doctrine of Harmony of Religions

Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of harmony of religions is based on 3 basic principles.

1. One is the acceptance of differences. He did not say 'All religions are the same.' Such a view is known as 'Indifferentism'. Acceptance also means not mere toleration but recognition of the validity of other religions.
2. The second principle is to see each religion through the eyes of its followers. This view is nowadays known as the 'Phenomenological' approach.
3. The third principle is Pluralism.

The doctrine of harmony of religions that Sri Ramakrishna taught is what is nowadays known as 'religious pluralism', not the Western brand of pluralism but the Indian brand of pluralism.

Three inter-religious attitudes are at present recognized in academic circles: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. To this Swami Vivekananda added a fourth category known as universalism. *Exclusivism* holds: 'My religion alone is true, all other religions are false.' *Inclusivism* holds: 'My religion alone is true, but other religions are not false, as they are included in my religion.' *Pluralism* holds that all religions are different pathways to Truth.

Sri Ramakrishna is the real source of inspiration for the modern notions of Pluralism. A pluralistic religious outlook has characterized Indian culture from the early Vedic times. But it was vague, general and was never tested or established as a philosophical principle. The harmony taught by Sri Ramakrishna was not a mere 'outlook' but was deeply rooted in his life and realizations. He tested and experientially validated its truth.

The original pluralistic outlook was to some extent lost during the Middle Ages; and it gave way to sectarian quarrels. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda not only restored the original spirit of religious harmony, but also enlarged its scope by including religions of non-Indian origin, such as Christianity and Islam.

Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of harmony consists of five key ideas of religious pluralism.

1. The Ultimate Reality is only one but is known by different names in different religions.
2. The Ultimate Reality is beyond the reach of ordinary mind and words; hence its real nature cannot be expressed in words.
3. The different views on the Ultimate Reality found in different religions are only opinions (*mat*).

   These opinions are not, however, wrong; they are all true as they reveal some aspects of the Ultimate Reality.
4. Although the true nature of the Ultimate Reality cannot be known by the ordinary mind, it is possible to transcend the

ordinary mind and directly experience it through a purified higher intuitive faculty.

5. This superconscious realization can be attained through different spiritual paths taught in different religions.

6. Since all these spiritual paths lead to the same ultimate goal all the religions of the world are true.

What the type of pluralism that is nowadays spreading among liberal-minded people in the West lacks is, an experiential basis. Sri Ramakrishna not only provided the philosophical framework for religious pluralism but also established it on an experiential foundation.

Other Types of Harmony

Apart from harmony of religions, Sri Ramakrishna taught other types of harmony such as: harmony of sects within Hinduism; harmony of spiritual paths; harmony of spiritual life and social life; harmony of the ancient and the modern traditions.

All these types of harmony are based on two basic principles:

(a) acceptance of diversity and difference as an expression of Divine spontaneity and freedom. They are an essential aspect of Divine lila, and are necessary for individual growth and creativity. To deny diversity and to force uniformity and conformity upon people would reduce humanity to the level of social insects like ants and honeybees.

(b) The second principle of harmony that Sri Ramakrishna followed was the transcendental unity of all existence in Brahman, the ultimate Reality. Once a person is established in the realization of the ultimate transcendental unity of life, he can accept all human temperaments, all cultures and other diversities of life.

Conflicts and quarrels arise only when people fail to understand the transcendental unity and refuse to accept diversity. It is, however, heartening to note that, barring fundamentalist groups in different countries, more and more liberal-minded people all over the world

are beginning to follow the paths of harmony that Sri Ramakrishna taught, although many of them may not know or recognize his role in establishing harmony.

7. Stress on Purity of Mind

Like all the other great prophets and world teachers, Sri Ramakrishna gave primary importance to morality in his teachings. Although the moral codes of world religions have much in common, there are also several differences among them. These differences in moral codes and conduct are often the cause of conflict among religions.

Sri Ramakrishna went beyond conventional morality, and stressed *purity*, which is the real basis and aim of all moral codes and conduct. The difference between conventional morality and purity is to be noted here. Morality is the basis of religion, whereas purity is the basis of spirituality. Morality is conformity to certain codes of conduct, whereas purity is freedom from desires and instinctual drives. Morality is how we appear to others; purity is what we actually are. A person's moral conduct becomes authentic only when he achieves purity of mind.

For purity of mind Sri Ramakrishna stressed two processes: renunciation of lust (*kāma*) and greed for wealth (*kānchan*), and observance of truthfulness. His advocacy of the renunciation of *kāma-kānchan* is to be understood in a larger context. At the individual level, millions of people have ruined themselves and their families by the uncontrolled pursuit of lust and lucre. At the social level, the alarming increase in crime, violence, immorality, drug abuse and other evils is the direct or indirect result of the promotion of unlimited pleasure seeking and greed as the twin goals of life. In this connection it should be mentioned that several immoral practices were being followed in the name of spirituality and Tantric cults in different parts of India, especially in Bengal. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda brought about a thorough cleansing of spiritual

life in general in India.

As regards truthfulness, the need for this virtue in individual life and Public life is so obvious that it needs no elaboration.

Sri Ramakrishna's teaching of purity was not a form of moralizing. It was a natural expression of his experience of Atman as the real nature of man. Atman is of the nature of pure, contentless consciousness. This means every person in his or her true original nature is pure and good. Immorality is a fall from one's own true nature. This is a natural way of teaching morality to youngsters without forcing them to follow moral codes and rules of conduct. This aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's message was developed further by Swami Vivekananda.

8. Philosophy of Spiritual Fulfilment

Prof. Max Müller has stated that in India philosophy was pursued 'not for the sake of knowledge but for the highest purpose that man strives after in this life.'[6] Sri Ramakrishna too, echoing the voices of thousands of saints and sages who lived in India during the five thousand years of the subcontinent's cultural history, repeatedly stated: *Isvarlābhi mānush jivaner uddeshya,* 'God realization is verily the purpose of human life.' Here two questions arise: What is meant by God realization? And why should one seek it?

In Vedanta, by God is meant the ultimate Reality known as Brahman, who is the ultimate source of all happiness, knowledge, love, power and freedom which human beings seek. Man's true Self, Atman, is an essential aspect or part of Brahman, but owing to *ajnāna* or ignorance, he is not aware of this fact. As a result he lives in a state of *alienation* from the ultimate Reality. All the problems and sufferings of human life may be traced to this spiritual alienation. When through appropriate means, known collectively as Yoga, the existential ignorance is removed; man realizes his true nature as Atman-Brahman. This is what is known as God realization. Thus Yoga or God realization is a process of *dealienation*, it is a process

of eliminating the soul's separation from God, which is usually described as a process of 'union' with God.

The need for this ultimate realization is a self-evident fact. There is in all human beings a basic inner quest. The quest for God realization is only the culmination of man's endless quest in life. What is it that all human beings seek in life? Perfection, power, love, freedom, meaning – these are some of the things which people apparently seek as their goal of life. However, according to the sages of the Upanishads, *ānanda* or happiness is what ultimately all human beings seek. 'Who would have even breathed, had there not been happiness in life?' asks the Upanishad.[7] The Upanishads also state that there are degrees of happiness corresponding to different levels of existence.[8] There is happiness at the physical level, at the emotional level, at the intellectual level, at the intuitive level. But these types of happiness are limited and impermanent. Therefore the Upanishad states: 'There is no real ānanda or bliss in the limited; only in the Infinite is there true bliss.'[9] All lower types of joy culminate in the supreme bliss of infinite Brahman or God. It is this boundless, everlasting bliss of Brahman that is the ultimate goal of human life, and provides the motivation to strive for God realization.

Transformation of consciousness is the key factor in human progress. Ordinary secular life is a struggle to transform animal consciousness into human consciousness; in effect this means a struggle to transform instincts and desires into reason and higher sentiments. Spiritual life is a struggle for the transformation of human consciousness into divine consciousness; in effect this means the struggle to transform reason and sentiments into spiritual illumination and divine love.

With the realization of Brahman, which is of the nature of *sat-citānanda*, human life attains its highest fulfilment (*parama-purushārtha*). A person who attains this state becomes a *jivan-mukta*,

'liberated-in-life'. Such a person sees the world as illusory, and lives unattached to anything. This is the highest ideal of life according to traditional Advaita Vedanta.

But Sri Ramakrishna did not regard this kind of individual spiritual fulfilment as the final goal of life. According to him, after the realization of the transcendental aspect of Brahman, the jivanmukta returns to the world and, seeing Brahman or God *immanent* in all beings, dedicates his whole life to the service of suffering humanity (*Shiva jāne jiva sevā*). He enjoys the supreme bliss of serving God in all beings. This is the highest ideal of life that humanity has reached anywhere in the world. This is the culminating point in Sri Ramakrishna's message.

Swami Vivekananda condensed the essence of Sri Ramakrishna's message in the form of twin ideals: *ātmano mokshārtham jagad hitāya ca*, 'For one's own salvation and for the good of the world.' Although this was originally intended to serve as the motto of the Ramakrishna Mission, it is really a universal ideal meant for all institutions and all people all over the world.

Significance of Sri Ramakrishna's Message to the Present-Day World

In this context it should be pointed out that any study of the significance and practical application of Sri Ramakrishna's message has to be done in the light of Swami Vivekananda's interpretation of his Master's message, his interpretation of Vedanta philosophy and Indian culture. The true power of Sri Ramakrishna's message can be understood only when it is combined with Swamiji's 'Practical Vedanta'.

That the basic principles of Sri Ramakrishna's message are relevant to the socio-cultural needs of the present-day world and the aspirations and goals of modern people is quite obvious. What we have to understand is how far these principles can be applied in

the different situations in life. For this it is necessary first of all to study the global human situation and understand the major trends in world thought and socio-cultural life.

Mega-trends in Modern Times

If we look at the present-day world, what first attracts our attention is the enormous increase in crime, violence, terrorism, immorality, drug abuse, break-down of family life, corruption in high places, market melt-down, political turmoils, religious conflicts, and other dark sides of modern human society. But if we look beyond these dark forces, we can see several mega-trends animating the collective mind and world thought in almost all parts of the free world. Some of these mega-trends are briefly discussed below.

1. The first mega trend is the **naturalization of technology** in everyday life. This is a consequence of the ongoing electronic revolution. Electronic gadgets like the transistor, the cell-phone, television, digital camera etc have now become an essential part of the daily life of common people. Communication, correspondence, keeping records, different modes of travel, medical diagnosis, scientific research, business transactions, entertainment, space travel, even modern warfare – every field of human life and activity is now dominated by technology.

Communication, however, does not mean only sending or receiving information through mechanical gadgets. Real communication is sharing of inner feelings, love and cooperation among people. Unless there is also corresponding growth in human understanding, wisdom, and commitment to values, mere advancement in technology does not ensure improvement of human relationships or social behaviour. A man may talk for two hours over the cell phone to somebody on the other part of the globe, but he may not be on speaking terms with his own wife or colleagues or neighbours. Some years ago there appeared a book *A Nation of Strangers* in which the author Vance Packard showed that the wide use of mass media has led to increasing

conformity but has not created a greater sense of *community* or mutual love. Without a sense of community, people seem to live in their own isolated worlds experiencing loneliness and meaninglessness.

Since Sri Ramakrishna's message deals mainly with the transcendental spiritual realms, it does not in any way clash with modern man's involvement in science and technology. On the other hand it helps him to adapt himself to science and technology without himself becoming a machine.

2. A second mega-trend in modern times is the recognition of the great importance of **human capital**. During the last fifty years in the East as well as in the West, man's self-image has been undergoing a radical transformation. The earlier image of man as cog in the wheel of Karma, or as a victim of the machinations of the Devil or Predestination is giving way to the recognition that everyone is responsible for his own moral life, health, wellbeing and happiness. There is also growing awareness that everyone is endowed with many capacities, talents and powers in a potential form, and the main purpose of education and training is to develop these inherent potentialities.

The 'human potential' trend is now seen in several fields. It began with the discovery, made after the Second World War, that the success of a company depends more on the 'human capital', that is, on the resourcefulness of its executives, than on financial capital or labour. Since then personality development and human resource development have assumed much importance especially in the business world. In the field of education, much emphasis is now laid on innovation and creativity. Owing to the direct or indirect influence of Swami Vivekananda, there is now a growing awareness that everyone has within him or her, a centre of divine power, knowledge and joy, and spiritual life is the development of these inner spiritual potential. Swamiji got his idea of the potential divinity of the soul from his Master.

3. A third mega-trend is **Neo-humanism.** Till recently the main thrust of humanism was concern for the poor, the sick, and the underprivileged, shown out of compassion or a sense of duty. Such an attitude is now considered to be demeaning to the dignity of the human individual. Neohumanism holds that it is the *right* of the underprivileged people, especially the tribals, to claim equal share of the bounties of life and equal treatment in all social matters. Handicapped people are now regarded not as disabled people but as 'differently enabled' people. Sri Ramakrishna's message of love and service, seeing God in all people has much relevance in rendering help to disabled and neglected people. His teaching of serving man as God (*Shiva-jnāne jiva-sevā*) gives to those people a sense of worth, value and dignity.

4. A fourth global trend is **moral relativism.** Until recently, religions had been regarded as the custodians of morality, and the rules of morality were believed to have been fixed by Divine Commandments. With the erosion of faith in traditional religions, the days of absolute standards of morality fixed by religion are gone. In most of the democratic countries the social life of the people is governed by the secular laws of the state. The present trend is to separate personal moral conduct from the purview of religious codes and to treat it as an individual's private affair. All over the world drastic changes have taken place in moral standards, and in the social behaviour of people. Some ways of life or modes of conduct which were once regarded as immoral are now treated as normal and moral.

The present-day social upsurge in Islamic countries, of which Talibanism is an extreme form, is a collective reaction to the decline in morality owing to the influence of the permissive Western culture. In India the ongoing agitation against corruption is also a collective reaction of the people against the sharp decline in moral integrity in the lives of those who are in power. In this context, Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on morality, which Swami Vivekananda developed into a moral philosophy, has much relevance.

We have several revolutions – electronics revolution, spiritual revolution, educational revolution and so on. What we need most now is a 'Moral Revolution'. We believe that Sri Ramakrishna has sown the seeds of such a moral revolution.

5. & 6. Two other mega-trends, **Globalization of Economy** and **Ecological Awareness**, are so well known that they need only to be noted here. So we move on to another significant global trend: Knowledge Revolution.

7. *Knowledge Revolution*: There have been three major revolutions or paradigm shifts in the history of mankind. Civilization began with the Agricultural Revolution which brought into existence the Agricultural society. In the 18th century came the Industrial Revolution which created the industrial society in several parts of the world. From the last decade of the 20th century began the **Knowledge Revolution** which is now bringing into existence the knowledge society. The term 'Knowledge Revolution' implies four streams of transformation of human consciousness. In the first place, it means the enormous multiplication and diversification of knowledge – what is known as 'knowledge explosion'. Secondly, it means that knowledge is the main force driving economic growth and social changes. Thirdly, with knowledge revolution, not only scientific knowledge, but every kind of knowledge gains significance and utility. This has opened up innumerable opportunities for human development and achievement. The last and most important point is, knowledge revolution means not only increase in different types of knowledge, but a radical change in the understanding of the very nature of knowledge, the process of knowing itself. This last point needs clarification.

Nature of Human Knowledge

Several developments in understanding the nature of human knowledge have taken place during the last one hundred years.

Knowledge was formerly thought to be something explicitly or consciously acquired by logical thinking through formal education. But structuralist discourses supported by phenomenological, psychoanalytical and cognitive studies have found the truth to be different. These investigations have shown that formal, explicit, propositional knowledge arises from a vast sea of informal, unconscious, embodied experience. Personal knowing and collective knowledge are mostly nonconscious. Explicit knowledge constitutes only the surface waves of the mental lake of deeper currents of experience and interpretation.

The importance of this understanding is that it strengthens the validity of faith, prayer, meditation and other means of acquiring religious knowledge. It also shows the validity of Sri Ramakrishna's use of parables and stories in his teachings.

The second development in understanding the nature of human knowledge originated in linguistics. At the beginning of the 20th century the Swiss thinker Saussure showed that words refer not to external objects but to mental concepts. Words are meaningful not because they correspond to external objects but because they rouse in the mind the concepts which correspond to the external objects. Every person is imprisoned in his own mental world of concepts and ideas. Learning is a process of modifying the knowledge which we already have. This view that all knowledge is conditioned by mental structures is known as 'structuralism'. In the field of education it is known as 'constructivism'.[10] Moreover, fear by logic, Chaos theory, study of myths and symbols (Semiotics), etc have shown the importance of non-linear, non-logical forms of knowledge.

This leads to the third development in understanding the nature of knowledge. This view, which originated with the 19th century German thinker Wilhelm Dilthey, holds that all human knowledge is the result of interpretation. Everyman sees the world through his own conceptual framework. When a person hears or reads

something, he immediately interprets it according to the knowledge that he already has. 'Understanding' is a continuous process of interpretation. Hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, is thus a basic discipline in education. This understanding has created a revolution in education. Formerly it was believed that a student's mind is a tabula rasa, a clean slate, and the teacher thrusts knowledge into his mind. But it is now understood that every child's mind is already conditioned by the knowledge that she has picked up and, when new ideas are presented to her, she interprets them in accordance with the knowledge which she has already acquired. In other words, a child learns by herself, or rather, teaches herself. The role of a teacher is only to 'enable' the student in this self-teaching and interpretation processes. This view is now known as 'enabling education'.

This idea was propounded more than a hundred years ago by Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji said: 'All knowledge, secular or spiritual, is in the human mind. In many cases it is not discovered, but remains covered. When the covering is being slowly taken off, we say "we are learning."' 'No one was ever really taught by another; each of us has to teach himself. The external teacher offers only the suggestion which rouses the internal teacher to work to understand things.'[11]

Dilthey's ideas were developed further by Wittgenstein, Paul Ricoer, Heideggar, Gadamer and other modern thinkers. According to these thinkers, the main function of language is to enable us to interpret our experiences, and not to describe the world.

The next step was taken by the Poststructuralists. They showed that the constant self-interpretation of knowledge a person does is not free or objective, but is conditioned by the historical, social and cultural circumstances in which he has grown up. The views of every author, in fact all concepts and principles, including scientific theories, are to be understood in the light of their socio-cultural and historical background. There is no such thing as true objectivity.

The so-called objectivity of scientific method is a kind of inter-subjectivity. Scientific theories describe not the nature of the world but our understanding of the nature of the world.

The extreme form of Poststructuralism, known as Postmodernism, also holds that to understand the true import of a literary text, it is necessary to reinterpret it in the light of the hidden ideas or other hints contained in the text which the author himself did not consciously intend. This kind of reinterpretation is known as 'Deconstruction', popularized by Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction is also often loosely used against all reductionist conclusions, including those of science.

The reason why we have undertaken this discussion on recent intellectual thought currents is that, if we omit some of the extreme and illogical views of postmodernists, we can see that some of the aspects of structuralist and poststructuralist discourses help us in understanding Advaita Vedanta better, and also in presenting the message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda in the modern idiom to modern people. Moreover, the philosophical concepts developed by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda have for too long been treated in a rather superficial way, and presented in a popular form for common people, especially for devotees. In view of the important role knowledge plays in modern society, the time has come for the philosophical concepts of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda to be brought into the streams of modern world thought so that their inherent power can be utilized in the ongoing transformation of human consciousness. But for this they are to be first brought under the scrutiny of modern academic study and research, and their truth claim and validity to be tested and substantiated within the modern framework of thought. The message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda are to be presented in a form which is acceptable in academic world.

Let us take the structuralist proposition that what is generally taken as reality is a function of the linguistic structures superimposed

upon experience. Let us also consider the views of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer and others that all human experience is basically interpretative. This view comes close to the Advaitic theory of *adhyāropa* or *adhyāsa. Adhyāropa* is usually translated as 'superimposition', which may give the impression that this world has been thrust upon Brahman. It is actually a matter of *interpretation.* We interpret the reality as we experience it according to our preexisting concepts, and thus create our own world. The *Pañcadaśī* speaks of two kinds of creation: one is *iswara-srishti* or God's creation, which is the world as it really is; the other is *jiva-srishti* which is the individual world created by each person by interpreting his experiences in accordance with his mental conditioning caused by *ajnana* or ignorance.

Following the same line of thought, we may take the Advaitic concept of *apavada* or desuperimposition as 'deconstruction' in a broad sense of the term. Shankaracharya has cited in different contexts a verse which sums up the essence of Advaita; *Adhyāropaapavādābhyām nishprapancam praprancyate,* 'By understanding the double process of superimposition and desuperimposition, the unreality of the world is established.'[12] Since *adhyāropa* is caused by ignorance, *apavada* is a process of removal of ignorance. This view explains better the modern ideas of universal hermeneutics and deconstruction.

Owing to the popularization of Advaita among the common people by many teachers and saints, concepts such as superimposition, desuperimposition, maya, etc appear to have been oversimplified, and their true import is seldom grasped. This is true of the concepts of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. They need to be studied in depth in the light of modern scholarship. Then only can the enlightening and transforming power of the message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji be fully utilized in the moral and spiritual elevation of humanity.

8. We have been discussing some of the main trends in modern world thought, and have covered 7 megatrends. We now come to

the 8th megatrend: the **Quest for Meaning**. The search for meaning is actually a part of the existential problems which modern human society is facing in many parts of the world, especially in the West.

Human problems are of 4 kinds: Economic problems, Social problems, Psychological problems, and Existential problems. In developed countries and many of the developing countries, economic problems have to a great extent been solved, and social and psychological problems are being tackled though not very successfully. Various factors such as disillusionment with the promises of science and technology, materialistic view of life, reaction to endless pursuit of sensual enjoyments, break up of social cohesion, etc have contributed to the enormous increase in the prevalence of existential problems. Some of these major existential problems are: loneliness, boredom, anxiety, longing for love, unfulfilment and above all, meaninglessness of life.

Unlike psychological problems which have specific external causes, existential problems don't have any external cause. They have their origin in man's awareness of his self-existence, his own individuality. The main cause of existential problems is alienation – alienation of the soul from God, alienation of the ego from the true Self or Atman, alienation of the conscious from the unconscious, and alienation of the individual from collective consciousness. Owing to these causes, life has become meaningless to many people.

Karl Marx spoke of the alienation of work from the worker. In modern times, the enormous increase in objective knowledge has caused alienation from the subject, from the true Self, resulting in loss of self-identity. People know so much about the external world and even about others, but don't know anything about their own true nature.

These existential problems and the enormous increase in stress caused by consumerism, competition for success, and the hurry and worry of modern life have led to the discovery of the importance of

spirituality and spiritual life. This takes us to the last global trend we wish to discuss here.

9. The last mega-trend of modern times, which is particularly significant in our discussion on the contemporary relevance of Sri Ramakrishna's life and message, is the **global spiritual movement.** All over the free world there is now an upsurge of interest in spiritual life. Millions of people now practice meditation, yoga, Zen, Vipassana and other spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual movement as such is not a new phenomenon. It had taken place many times before in different parts of the world. But the present-day spiritual movement differs from the earlier ones in several respects. In the first place, it is universal in its nature. It cuts across the barriers of race, religion, and class and is going on in all parts of the free world. The mass media, especially the Internet, globalization of economy and other socio-economic and cultural forces are bringing the peoples of the world closer together than ever before. The spiritual treasures of different religious traditions are now easily available to all people all over the world. And, since modern education has broadened the minds of many of them to a great extent, they are able to absorb the best elements of different spiritual traditions. Close interactions between Eastern and Western cultures have been going on for several decades. As a result of all these changes, a broad-spectrum global spirituality is taking shape.

Another notable feature of present spiritual movement is the separation of spirituality from traditional religion. Formerly, spirituality, known more commonly as 'mysticism' in the West, had always been associated with religion. But the present tendency is to treat spirituality as an independent discipline. Religion is based on faith in God, in a Prophet and creed, following certain customs, rituals etc and allegiance to certain institutions. By contrast, spirituality is a personal, inner quest for ultimate Truth, meaning, freedom, joy, love. This separation of spirituality from religion is

so unusual and radical in Western culture that it is often called 'spiritual revolution'.

A third feature of the present spiritual movement is that it is supported by science and technology. As long as spirituality remained a part of religion, science was antagonistic to it. But in recent years the connecting link between science and spirituality has been found: it is **consciousness**. Recent studies conducted by neuroscientists, psychologists and philosophers have shown that the phenomena of consciousness and transcendental spiritual experiences cannot be explained only on the basis of neural activity. In physics, apart from the limitations of mathematical knowledge shown by Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and Godel's Theorem, a major problem is posed by the discovery that the nature of subatomic particles depends upon the mode of observation. The electron, for instance, appears as a particle if a particle detector is used; and as a wave if a wave detector is used. All these developments have forced many modern scientists to regard consciousness as an essential aspect of reality.

Contributions of Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji to the Spiritual Movement

Anyone who studies the ongoing spiritual movement can see that it owes much to the contributions made by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. By showing that spirituality is the real essence of all religions, and that all spiritual paths lead to the same goal, Sri Ramakrishna brought about the separation of spirituality from religion. Swami Vivekananda carried this work further and, by showing the common ground among different spiritual traditions, laid the foundation for Universal Religion, by which he actually meant universal spirituality, which is now known as 'global spirituality'

Relevance of Sri Ramakrishna's Message

We have discussed above the mega-trends of modern times for two reasons. In the first place, if we want to understand the

universal significance of Sri Ramakrishna's message for all humanity, and not merely for a group of his devotees, we have to take into consideration these mega-trends. We have to understand what role Sri Ramakrishna's message can play in these mega-trends.

Secondly, these mega-trends show that in spite of all the differences that human beings show, they have many things in common, and humanity is moving towards a common goal, which is spiritual in nature. The present global spiritual movement is not a passing fad. It seems to mark the beginning of a collective awakening of the spiritual consciousness of humanity. Darwin's theory of evolution applies only to animals and plants. According to eminent biologists like Julian Huxley, at the human level evolution becomes predominantly psycho-social. In the view of spiritual leaders like Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard Chadrin, the next stage in human evolution is spiritual. Swamiji has explained yoga as revolution. Evolution is slow, yoga is a process of speeding up evolution; hence yoga may be regarded as 'spiritual revolution'. What it takes nature to accomplish in ten thousand years, yoga can accomplish in a single life time.

Swami Vivekananda has stated that Sri Ramakrishna's birth marks the dawn of a new Golden Age of spirituality. What does Golden Age or Satya Yuga mean now? It means humanity is now poised to take an evolutionary leap in consciousness. There are indications to believe that in future spirituality is going to play a dominant role, transforming human consciousness into Divine consciousness. The relevance of Sri Ramakrishna's message to modern times should be judged not merely by its effects on the socio-cultural and spiritual life of the people in the present-day world, but also by the immense possibilities that it holds for the all-round well-being and spiritual elevation of humanity in the future.

Notes and References

[1] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2000, Vol. 6, p. 134

[2] Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya, "The Advaita and its Spiritual Significance", in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Kolkata: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2001, Vol. 3, p. 245

[3] The 'unripe ego' is referred to in different places in the *Gospel*, as for instance, on pp.105, 168, 790

[4] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, tr. Swami Nikhilananda, Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2000, p. 940 and passim

[5] Ibid., p. 138

[6] Max Müller, *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*, p. 370

[7] *Taittiræya Upanishad*, 2.7.1

[8] Ibid., 2.8.1-4

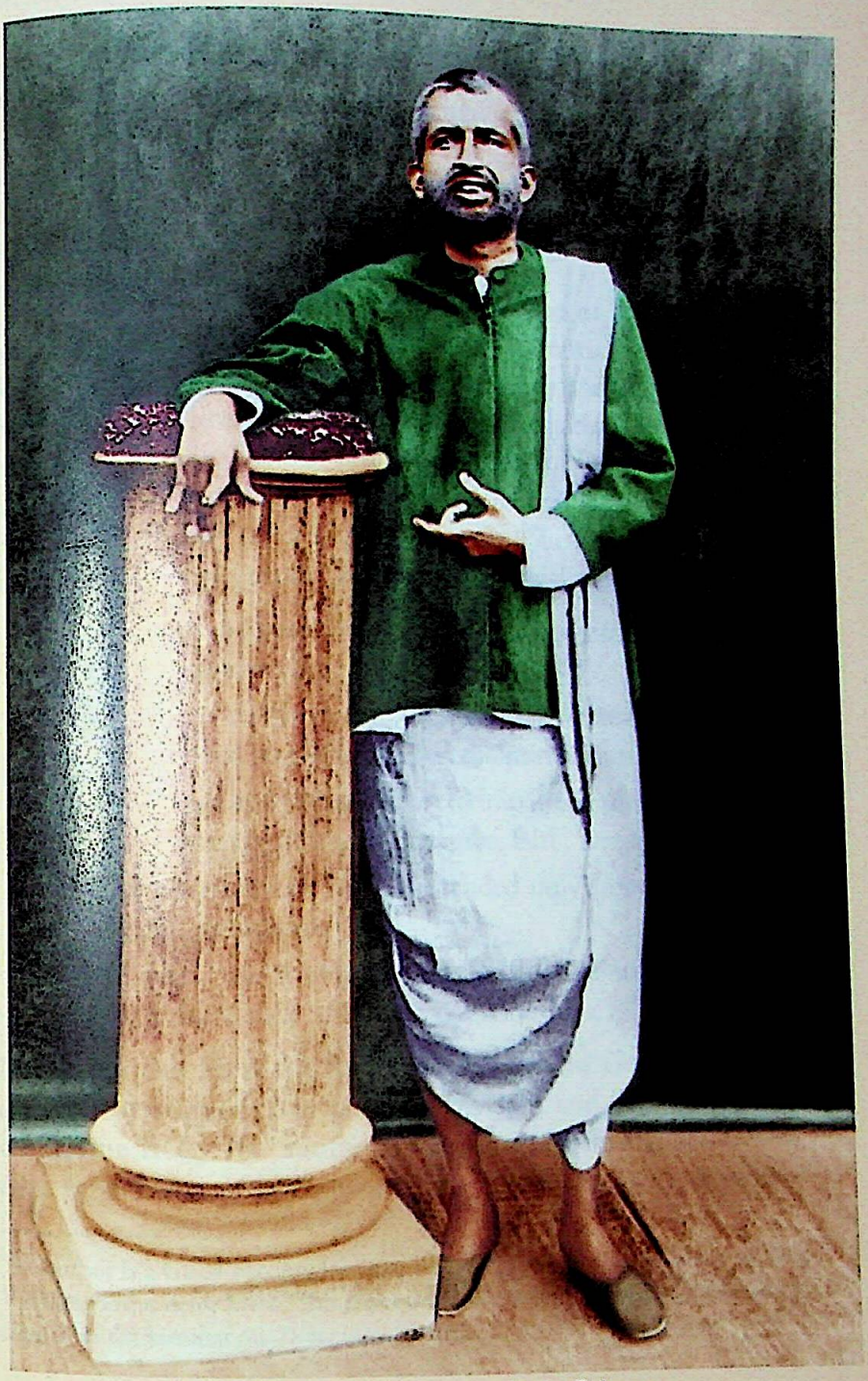
[9] *Yo vai bhumā tat sukham, na alpe sukham asti, Chāndogya Upanishad*, 7.23.1

[10] For a clear understanding of 'structuralism', 'constructivism', etc. see Brent Davis, *Inventions of Teaching*, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004, Chapters 10, 11. Also Mark W. Aulls and Bruce M. Shore, *Enquiry in Education*, New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008

[11] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 1, p. 28 & 93

[12] Quoted by Shankara in his Commentary on the *Gita*, 13.13

Perspectives on Sri Ramakrishna



Sri Ramakrishna at a studio in Calcutta,
photo taken on 10 December 1881

Sri Ramakrishna's Idea of God: Collective Perspective

Swami Sanmayananda

Introduction: God's nature has been a bone of contention to philosophers and pious men since time immemorial. Has God any form or not? Is God endowed with attributes or not? Is He personal or impersonal, immanent or transcendent, material or spiritual, specific or generic, finite or infinite, objective or subjective? Is God a substance or a quality, or a cluster or qualities? Is He omniscient, merciful, almighty and omnipresent, or not? Such dichotomies have arisen in countless number regarding the actual nature of God.

All the questions mentioned above are, however, cognitive in nature and presuppose that

1. God is an object of knowledge or cognitive enquiry like a table, a tool, the sun, the sky, the mind or an idea etc;
2. God must have one-sided determinations admittable by all irrespective of culture, education, faith, race or nation;
3. God's nature can be apprehended only from a particular logical perspective;
4. All determinations regarding God's nature must be made in the waking state of human consciousness.

Nature of the Idea: Sri Ramakrishna's idea of God keeps aside all such presuppositions and invokes each and every person to determine freely the nature of God in his own manner, by his own experience, with his own intellect, from his own perspective

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or state of consciousness. Sri Ramakrishna did not deny today's individualistic attitude even in the field of search into the nature of God. Such an expansion of his intellectual horizon enabled him to combine all other possible views in this regard into his own idea of God and accept their relative truth- claims. This paper is an attempt to determine the nature of Sri Ramakrishna's perspective through which he expressed his idea of God and to guess the nature of God that follows consequently.

We can find a brief and pithy expression of his idea of God in the following saying quoted from *Sri Ramakrishna The Great Master* a book originally written in Bengali by Swami Saradananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and translated by Swami Jagadananda: "One should not fix a limit to the nature of God. He is with forms and without forms, with attributes and without attributes. Who can know and say what else He is besides."

Significance of the idea: This utterance of Sri Ramakrishna concerning God's nature logically implies that:

a) God is limitless or indeterminate by nature.
b) All determinations are relatively true of God.
c) None can know or say the whole or absolute nature of God.
d) Innumerable determinations are possible about God from different perspectives.

Again the utterance ethically implies that people should not quarrel among themselves as regard the exact nature of God. No individual, group or sect should be considered wise in claiming his or its assertion, in this regard, to be true, and others' false.

In this context we may recall the famous 17th century rationalist philosopher, Benedict Spinoza, who asserted that every determination is a limitation and that God is one indeterminate substance full of infinite attributes. Now a student of philosophy may be prompted here to ask if Spinozistic concept of God and that of Sri Ramakrishna are the same. That indeterminateness of

Sri Ramakrishna's God is more extensive than that of Spinoza's can be shown from the following assertion of Sri Ramakrishna, made during his conversation with devotees:

"God has form and He is formless too. Further, He is beyond both form and formlessness. No one can limit Him!"[1]

Here we find that Sri Ramakrishna's God transcends all limits, even those set up by laws of logic. Spinoza would refuse to transgress the law of logical contradiction to proclaim that God is both with and without form. Does Sri Ramakrishna's concept of God involve a logical contradiction? Obviously not, if we can guess the universal or collective perspective of God's indeterminateness. Sri Ramakrishna crossed the limits of personal perspective to announce that God has both form and formlessness. Here lies the most extensive catholicity of his heart ready to embrace others' views as his own. It is a fact, and it does not involve any logical contradiction that different people on this earth conceive the nature of God differently and hold even mutually opposite views. The purport of Sri Ramakrishna's assertion is that God is beyond the limit of personal perspectives. Sri Ramakrishna's God is, therefore, of all and for all.

Different Perspectives: Here we are precisely concerned not with the limitless nature of God, but with some views or attitudes possible about the limitless nature of God. Limits of particular perspectives of individuals, groups, sects or schools are involved here. The questions that we have to deal with are not like: Is God indeterminate or determinate? Is God one or many or one-in-many? Is God substance or qualities? The questions pertinent here are: Does Sri Ramakrishna's idea of God reflect only a monistic character or a dualistic one, or one of qualified monism? Is Sri Ramakrishna's idea of God cognitive or affective or conative? Is Sri Ramakrishna's idea of God realistic or idealistic, materialistic or spiritualistic? Is it metaphysical, or epistemological, or axiological i.e. logical, ethical and aesthetic? Is his idea of God scientific or unscientific?

If we analyze Sri Ramakrishna's life, sayings and attitude, we shall find that all the answers to the above questions are partly affirmative and partly negative. From a particular perspective Sri Ramakrishna's idea of God may be regarded as monistic. When Sri Ramakrishna speaks of "Indivisible Saccidānanda"[2] as the 'Nitya' or Eternal God his idea reads monistic. But when he says, "Nitya and Līlā are the two aspects of one and the same reality"[3] his idea expresses the perspective of a qualified monist. Here Sri Ramakrishna combines the Vaiṣnavite idea of Śakti with the Advaita idea of Brahman. He often asserted that when God is active He is called 'Śakti', and when He remains actionless He is termed 'Brahman'. Sri Ramakrishna wanted to put an end to the long-cherished controversy among monism, qualified monism and dualism, regarding the nature of the Absolute Reality. To the monistic intellect the Absolute Reality appears as the Non-dual Indivisible Indescribable Infinity, to the intellect prone to qualified monism the Absolute Reality appears as One Infinite God full of numberless attributes and to the dualistic intellect the Absolute Reality appears as two types of reality: the Divine and the non-Divine. According to Sri Ramakrishna all these three 'isms' refer only to three intellectual perspectives expressing three mutually antagonistic determinations each of which has the truth-claim of the same measure if considered from its particular perspective. But Sri Ramakrishna's God is above all 'isms' or limits of intellectual determinations. His God is not non-dualistic but Non-duality, not opposed to any intellectual determinations about Him. It is the consummative point of culmination of them all. Sri Ramakrishna's collective perspective, susceptive of all intellectual determinations may be termed 'Bhāgavat' or 'Divine' and Non-duality grasped by it is 'Bhāgavat Advaita' or 'Divine Non-duality'.

Psychological Perspectives: Coming to the problem as to whether Sri Ramakrishna's idea of God is cognitive, affective or conative, we can say that it can be characterized as all the three completely and separately, jointly, and again negatively. His description of God as

having or having not forms obviously shows his cognitive idea of God. Affective idea of God was formed and expressed out of his emotional interaction mainly with his Divine Mother, the Goddess Kali. Sri Ramakrishna said, "I say to the Divine Mother: 'O Mother, give me love for the lotus feet.'"[4] Likewise his conative idea of God was expressed by his behavioural attitude when he stood before his Divine Mother to ask her permission for the performance of any important deed. He told his Divine Mother, "I speak as Thou makest me speak, I move as Thou makest me move"[5] His ideal God was not, therefore, an object of cognition only, but also of affection and conation too.

God's nature can be revealed not only to the cognitive mind or through cognitive ideas alone, but also to the affective mind or through emotive ideas, and to the conative mind or through conative ideas as well. We can say that Sri Ramakrishna knew God, and that Sri Ramakrishna loved God and dealt with God. God was for him not to believe only, but to be lived.

Two Dichotomies: Sri Ramakrishna's idea of God appears to be both realistic and materialistic. He held that God is the only real thing, all other things are nothing. He also asserted that "The water-pot is God, the bowl is God". It is narrated in *Sri Ramakrishna, The Great Master* that he put his palm under the nostrils of the image of Goddess Kali to verify if the Goddess is real, and not merely ideal, to inhale and exhale like a living being. Besides, his worship of stony image of goddess Kali as the Divine Mother of the universe reveals his materialistic attitude towards God. Sri Ramakrishna comes nearer to the Cārvāka materialists in proclaiming physical bodies as conscious soul. His idealistic and spiritualistic idea of God is reflected in his saying, "God Himself has become the twenty four cosmic principles: the mind, intellect, body and so forth."[6] Elsewhere he says, "Pure mind, Pure Buddhi (intellect) Pure Atman all these are one and the same."[7] His God is both real and ideal, again material and spiritual.

Metaphysical Perspective: God's nature was revealed to Sri Ramakrishna sometimes through a metaphysical perspective, sometimes through an epistemological perspective and some other times through some axiological ones. Sri Ramakrishna says, "Both the Līlā and the Nitya belong to the same Reality. In one form it is the Absolute, and in the other the Lila."[8] Again he asserts, "No one can say with finality that God is only 'this' and nothing else."[9] Metaphysically, therefore, Sri Ramakrishna's God is beyond the limits of particular descriptions. Such a position can posit a solution to metaphysical problems concerning substance and quality, universal and particular etc. Sri Ramakrishna arrived at his metaphysical idea of God, not through cognition alone, but through affective emotion and conative activities too.

Epistemological Perspective: As to his epistemological perspective we can cite the following exhortation: "God himself has become everything the universe and its living beings. You will realize it when you have perfect knowledge." The assertion epistemologically implies that God's real nature can be realized only by perfect knowledge and not by imperfect one we ordinarily have of this universe, its cause and its inhabitants. This division of knowledge into perfect and imperfect, however, can raise a controversy of epistemic importance.

Axiological Perspectives:

a. Logical Perspective: He also expressed his logical perspective in this regard in making God's nature intelligible to others. People often speak of God's partiality in making some creatures happy, some unhappy, some strong and some others weak etc. In reply to such an objection Sri Ramakrishna often said, "God himself has become the twenty-four principles; the mind, intellect, body and so forth. Is there any one but Himself to whom He can show partiality?"[10] This answer sets a logical argument that if we accept God's infinite nature we cannot raise any question of his partiality al all. The way Sri Ramakrishna exposed the nature of his cherished God can help

us to develop a system of collective logic for determining or judging metaphysical statements. Such a system of logic involves factors of social psychology too.

b. Ethical Perspective: Coming to Sri Ramakrishna's ethical perspective we find that he asserts 'Īśvara darśan' or realization of Godliness as the highest end or summum bonum of human life. Attainment of Godliness, according to him, should be the moral standard for all human ethical efforts. Here again we shall find that moral standard cherished by Sri Ramakrishna is not contrary to other moral standards professed by hedonists, rigorists, perfectionists or eudaemonists. Sri Ramakrishna's God being infinite in nature can very well be viewed as infinite pleasure which hedonists can hardly consider to be opposite to their esteemed moral standard of getting pleasure. Infinite physical pleasure, may imply, as Swami Vivekananda held, pleasure received by infinite number of living bodies as one's own. Again what the rigorist Kant views as the complete good can well be equated with the goal of a niṣkāma karmi or dispassionate worker performing his duty for the attainment of unselfish beatitude of Godliness. Sri Ramakrishna's God, however, cannot be identified with God viewed by Kant as a moral expostulation. The former is not only ethical but also metaphysical, epistemological etc. Besides what perfectionists call perfection or eudaemonists call universal welfare, as their moral standard can very well be identified with God-realization conceived by Sri Ramakrishna. For to him God is the Perfection and Universal Goodness as well. In fact some of the perfectionists and/or eudaemonists claim such an identity.

As the end-all of human life Godliness considered by Sri Ramakrishna from various perspectives can be equated with mokṣa of the Vedantists' perspective, kaivalya of the Sāṅkhya yoga view, Nirvāna of the Buddhists, Arhattva of the Jainists', salvation of the Christian faith and even with the Infinite Heaven of the Islamic faith or the Svarga of the Mimāṅsaka view. Sri Ramakrishna's idea of God is so broad and composite that he did not need any other

term like 'mokṣa', 'mukti' etc. to indicate the highest end of ethical or religious life. God- realization is the be-all and end-all of human life, according to him.

The assertion mentioned below expresses significance of Sri Ramakrishna's moral concept of God in another chapter of ethics: "God alone is the Doer; all others are instruments in His hands."[11] But if God be the sole moral agent of the world, why should criminals be punished? Why should God bear moral responsibility for our evil deeds? The answer in defence of Sri Ramakrishna is that those who punish and those who are punished do not believe in God's moral agency. Being ignorant of the real cause of the mundane phenomena they bring about moral anomaly in the society. If they knew it no such situation would arise at all. The answer to the second question is that it is God's mercy or kindness that he bears moral responsibility for evil deeds of all. Moreover Sri Ramakrishna's God being all why should we make a distinction between the moral doer and the holder of moral responsibility? But should not God be punished for his instigating people into committing evil deeds? If God is the sole Doer, then He has to punish Himself, and who can know that He is not punishing Himself by incarnating Blissful Himself again and again down into the mundane vortex of plagues and sorrows? Finally if we can have a holistic perspective of the world's journey towards perfection evils will appear as experience necessarily good for moral rectification of people at large.

c. Aesthetic Perspective: Sri Ramakrishna could perceive his Infinite God even from a purely aesthetic perspective. God was also Infinite Beauty to him, and at times Beauty appeared before his concentrated sense perception. In his early boyhood Sri Ramakrishna alias Godadhar fell into a trance-like state being enraptured by the picturesque beauty of a flock of white herons flying in the shape of a torn garland against the black cloudy sky behind. This reminds us of the poet Wordsworth who experienced an ecstatic trance at the sight of some beautiful daffodils bloomed in a field. Sri Ramakrishna's

ecstatic attitude was revealed also in his concentrated listening to classical songs, or in one-pointed perception of an actress acting a role, or in judging the appearance of divine beauty in the earthen image of gods and goddesses, to mention a few cases.

Axiologically, therefore God can be viewed as the consummation of the three values of human life – truth, beauty and goodness.

Scientific Perspective: Now if God is of the nature of the Absolute Truth or Reality is He not also related to relative or empirical truths with which descriptive sciences deal? One Infinite God as the Absolute Truth cannot necessarily oppose or contradict empirical truths of the physical reality. From scientific perspective God can be viewed as One Infinite Substance. In fact the great physicist Albert Einstein expressed his belief in Spinozistic One Substance God or Nature-God in his talks with Rabindranath Tagore. Likewise the concept of a single force operating in the physical universe can bring a physicist nearer to God conceived by Sri Ramakrishna as the One Irresistible Will-force controlling the physical and other possible worlds. Again transcending the limits of scientific perspective Sri Ramakrishna conceived sentient God as both the Creator and the Destroyer of all laws governing the physical universe.

Humanistic Perspective: Sri Ramakrishna's idea of God took the shape of spiritual humanity in its application. He advised his disciples to serve living beings as God. "If God be worshipped in clay-images," he asked with wonder, "why should He not be so in living bodies?"

Conclusion: There may be innumerable other perspectives than those discussed above regarding the nature of God, and Sri Ramakrishna could sympathize with and accept all of them as his own perspectives. All perspectives are products of man's finite mind, and Sri Ramakrishna had no particular perspective that can be called 'synthetic' over and above them in this sense. If there be any such synthesis, that must be supra-mental in nature, identical with Divine

Consciousness. But in relation to finite minds God is viewed by the Vedantists as collective consciousness wherein all limited perspectives of man peacefully co-exist with their equal importance and value in respect of the limitless nature of God. Sri Ramakrishna's idea of God reflects such collective consciousness wherein perspectives vary infinitely, but the nature of God cannot. If we can imagine, or to borrow Kantian terminology, if we have an apperception of God, over and above all possible perspectives of Him, then according to Sri Ramakrishna we should say that God is avāṅmanasogocara or beyond the reach of words and functions of the mind. We may recall here a remark of Ludwig Wittgenstein, an eminent modern philosopher of language: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."

Notes and References

[1] Mahendranath Gupta, (M.), *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, translated from the original Bengali book *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamita* by Swami Nikhilananda [1942], Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre, New York, Ch. VII, p. 116 and passim

[2] Ibid., Ch. XVII, p. 318

[3] Ibid., Ch. XXXV, p. 399

[4] Ibid., Ch. III, p. 31

[5] Ibid., Ch. XLVII, p. 820

[6] Ibid., Ch. XLIII, p. 747

[7] Ibid., Ch. XLII, p. 729

[8] Ibid., Ch. XLII, p. 730

[9] Ibid., Ch. VI, p. 72

[10] Ibid., Ch. XLIII, p. 747

[11] Ibid., Ch. XXIII, p. 377

Fish and Fisherman Imagery in Sri Ramakrishna's Teachings: Discourses on Power and Beyond in the Light of the Vedas and Mahabharata

Indrajit Bandyopadhyay

Sri Ramakrishna's anecdotes and similes are mostly from everyday life sources. Certain imageries recur in them. In this paper, I will discuss on his use of fish-fisherman imagery as found in Mahendranath Gupta's diary *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita.*[1]

Sri Ramakrishna's rural background, his mostly 'Fish-loving' Bengali audience, his regular viewing of fishing in the Ganga, his Tantra Sādhanā with symbolic fish[2] – all these are obvious reasons why fish-fisherman imagery abound in his anecdotes.[3]

However, as I shall attempt to show in this paper, such imagery is Sri Ramakrishna's 'natural' legacy of the tradition of Vedic Dharma upheld by Krishnadvaipāyana and Vāsudeva-Krishna – which, with his ingenious genius, Sri Ramakrishna further re-creates and transforms into metaphors of Self-realized philosophic and soteriological concepts as 'Sahaja' expressions of Truth.

1. Fish/Fisherman Imagery, Food and Power

In the Vedas and the Mahabharata,[4] fish is a symbol and metaphor for God, King, Yogī, powerlessness, vulnerable ordinary man, spiritually weak persons, [5] and destined victim of Kāla.[6]

Vyāsa's frequent use of fish-fisherman imagery, including

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Mātsyanyāya imagery[7], the Indra-Vritra myth of Satapatha Brāhmana in terms of 'eating' and 'food,'[8] primacy of food stated in *Śatapatha Brāhmana*,[9] and in the Upanishads[10] – all suggest that fish/fisherman imagery related to food is actually imagery of power.

Krishna interprets Indra-Vritra war as an internal war,[11] and Indra overcomes the Asuras only after understanding his Self[12] because external conquest is not possible without internal conquest.[13]

Indra 'armed with net,' is the archetypal fisherman and Vritra is the archetypal fish.[14] Indra's being Samrāt, Svarāt, Kshetravidam, lord of two Rashtras (of his Self and of people), spiritual guide, 'vratapā,' and 'Vidvān'[15] – show the essential qualities of fisherman – the combination of Rishi and King – a fact, also evident in the transcultural symbols and metaphors of fish and fisherman[16].

2. God: Fish/Fisherman Paradox

In 'Hindu' philosophy, God/Purusha is fish,[17] and also fisherman – the role prominently evident in Śiva, Śakti (Pārvatī/Kali), Vishnu, and Krishna.[18]

Sri Ramakrishna's God is fish playing in pond-water of heart, invisible from 'outside' owing to reeds and scum of Māyā. Again, God is fisherman catching fish-beings with his Māyā-net, only allowing the big-fish free-souls to escape.

Once, Sri Ramakrishna compares Keśab Candra Sen's state of sitting "motionless, like a log of wood" with fish that has eaten the bait, implying, fisherman-God captures one's spiritual Self.

In the Mahabharata cosmic scheme, God and Kāla – time are 'eater' of all.[19] Kāla represents fish/fisherman paradox being 'Eater' as well as 'Eaten'.[20]

To Sri Ramakrishna and Ramprasad, Kali is supreme, because "even Brahmā and Vishnu have lost their consciousness" owing to Mahāmāyā's Māyā. In the Mahabharata in the cosmic scheme,

Vishnu's power is not absolute (Mahabharata: 13.14.54.85-10), and even Vishnu is subject to Kāla who creates Gods repeatedly (13.1.48-49)! Vyāsa further suggests the same through the nature of Krishna's 'ordinary' death at the hands of Jarā – a Nishāda-Vyādha, therefore a "Fisherman."

At the time of Krishna's death, Kāla appears as Kali,[21] Jarā-Nishāda, and fisherman,[22] netting mighty alligators (mahāgrāhām)[23] Krishna and Balarāma – implying Kāla/Kali is the ultimate fisherman.[24]

Kali being the central divinity in Sri Ramakrishna's life, his use of fish/fisherman-imagery, therefore, must be understood in above light.

2.1. Kāma: Fish/Fisherman Paradox

In Sri Ramakrishna's narrative, a fisherman-kite gains peace after giving up a fish when pursued and disturbed by crows – and the Fish in this narrative is Sri Ramakrishna's metaphor for Kāma. Fish becomes a 'literal' metaphor in Sri Ramakrishna's self-humourous comment on an episode of his personal life; once he tells his disciples that once he had 'Kāma' to "eat fish curry with eggplant."

In the Mahabharata and the Upanishad, Kāma and Krodha are likened to fish/crocodile – born of fish-Rajah-Guna (rajomīnam[25]) at the self-level,[26] which fosters Ahamkāra-fish.[27]

Fisherman-Kāma's net,[28] and bait is Kāminī – woman – to catch man fish.[29] Sri Ramakrishna also warns his disciples against Kāminī/Kāma.

Kāma is thus a "fish/fisherman"- paradox, and the secret of its power is in this paradox.

2.2. Yogī: Fish/Fisherman Paradox

Yogī is big-fish[30] who can break through Kāma-fisherman's net,[31] and Yogī is also fisherman.[32] Yogī needs Buddhi and Prajñā – also likened to the fisherman.[33]

In the Mahabharata Arjuna's triumph over crocodiles[34] suggests his conquest over Kāma.

Since Yogī also represents the "fish/fisherman"-paradox, the Yogī posed against Kāma is actually one paradox battling against another paradox.

The message in the traditional imagery of "fish/fisherman" is that, Kāma's power is owing to its being of paradoxical nature, and the Yogī can defeat Kāma by assuming the same paradoxical nature.

As we will see, Sri Ramakrishna's fish and fisherman-imagery reveal the same wisdom, and Sri Ramakrishna himself represents the "fish/fisherman"-paradox.

3. Fisherman Sri Ramakrishna

In his divine experience of samādhi, Sri Ramakrishna feels himself like a fisherman "pulling the Mother of the Universe" towards himself, the way a fisherman throws a net and drags it for some time.

This is Sri Ramakrishna's unique revolutionary philosophy, in which, the devotee becomes the centre in God-devotee relation; he thus deconstructs the conventional 'belief' that God is the centre and devotee is the margin.

Fish is Sri Ramakrishna's metaphor for 'material self'; death of fish implies birth of spiritual Self. Seeing Dr. Sarkar's growing spiritual inclination, a devotee remarks "The fish was hooked, but the line broke," and Sri Ramakrishna smiles: "It was tied to the fishhook. The fish will die and come to the surface," implying, Dr. Sarkar's spiritual inclination will never wane as he is 'hooked' by the "fisherman" Sri Ramakrishna's blessings.

Sri Ramakrishna is the fisherman that kills the fish of material life, and draws the devotee towards spirituality. However, he discerns to 'release' Kāma-fish-like harmful 'big-fish' Hājrā who "only argues" – thus, Hājrā, though not entirely deprived of Sri Ramakrishna's compassion, can never become "fisherman" to Kāma.

Once when Sri Ramakrishna is silent in Bhāva, Sri M. sees in him a fisherman with "all attention" and "a concentrated mind."

Being child-like and 'nistraigunyo' (Gita: 2.45) Sri Ramakrishna is Fisherman – Beyond the Mātsyanyāya of three Gunas – Sattva-Rajah-Tamah (Gita: 14.10).[35]

3.1. Fisherman Teacher

"Fisherman"[36] inspires Rāmāyana – when Vālmiki sees the death of a bird at a Nishāda-Vyādha's hand[37]; and Nishāda-Vyāsa – who is both fish and fisherman[38] composes shepherd-fisherman[39] Krishna's life-story ending at a Nishāda-Vyādha's hands.

Sri Ramakrishna narrates the tale of an Avadhuta[40] who learns from a fisherman, and fisherman-birds – heron and kite. In the Rigveda, fish suggests disease of the soul that fisherman-bird Kingfisher can take away in its flight (10.97.13). In the Upanishadic philosophy (elaborated in the Mahabharata), particularly in Sāmkhya Darśan, 'disease of the soul' is caused owing to disbalance of three Gunas – leading us to the same imagery that Mātsyanyāya in Self is 'disease.'

From the fisherman's concentration, the Avadhuta learns not to attend to anything else before finishing one's devotions; from the kite that gives up pursuit of a fish, he learns to "throw off the burden of the worldly desires he carries" to attain peace; and from a heron concentrating on catching Fish oblivious to danger from Vyādha, he learns never to bother who is behind, when in meditation.

Elsewhere, Sri Ramakrishna explains that a fisherman's patience and devotion is necessary to attain God,[41] and idle and Tāmasik men are those who cannot catch Fish by themselves and depend on others for 'eating' fish.

Sri Ramakrishna narrates the tale of Arjuna's piercing the fish-target at Draupadī's Svayamvarām as an example of deep concentration.[42] Arjuna has prominent fisherman-role in the Mahabharata.

In another of Sri Ramakrishna's narratives, fish-fisherman imagery acts as the background to reveal a man's hypocrisy. The man apparently counts beads for Japa but has his mind in bargaining fish with a fisherman.

Fisherman sometimes suggests habituated and psychologically dependant existence, as in the case of the fisherwomen who could only sleep by keeping the "empty basket of fish" ('āńś cupdī') emanating fish-stench close to her nose.

To Sri Ramakrishna, the mind's natural state is Yoga, like a fisherman's 'Satkā Kal'[43] that "suddenly springs up" to regain its "upright position" once the fish has swallowed the bait – that is, once the mind has dealt with Kāma.

This is yet another revolutionary message of Sri Ramakrishna and a great hope for humanity – that every man is 'naturally' a "fisherman" capable of using the mind as an instrument ('Satkā Kal') to conquer Kāma-fish.

4. Fish Sri Ramakrishna and Fish-Metaphors

If Sri Ramakrishna is "fisherman" he is also "fish;" he likens his 'experience in the state of samādhi' with a fish released from a pot into the Ganga, or a fish swimming joyfully in the ocean of Sat-Cit-Ānanda, and he also wants to be a fish in the claws of Brahmamayī (in Ramprasad's song), implying, a devotee-fish is under absolute power of fisherman-Kali – indeed, an interchanging role of fish/fisherman in the 'Līlā' of God-devotee relation.

4.1. Fish: Spiritual Experience of Ānanda

Fish is Sri Ramakrishna's metaphor for the state of being in samādhi. One of the movements of spiritual current during samādhi is like the movements of fish. Bhāva creates motion in the being like a big-fish surging up the water in motion. Radha's Mahābhāva is compared with fish (in a song).[44]

Fishes gathering to eat puffed rice in Mati Seal Lake in Belgharia stimulates him "as if the fish of the Ātman is sporting in the sea of Sacchidānanda."

In his narrative of Gaura and Nitai proposing "magur māccher jhol, yuvatī meyer kol, bol Hari bol ('Soup of magur fish, embrace of a young woman, and repeat the name of Hari'), to 'tempt' worldly people to spirituality, fish-soup is metaphor for tears falling in love of Hari. Here, fish symbolizes sublimated temptation.

Kāma tempts, yet Kāma can be defeated with 'temptation', – this is Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual upāya (strategy) of how to use the power of paradox against the power of paradox of Kāma!

4.2. Fish-Cuisine: Different Attitudes & Religious Beliefs

Sri Ramakrishna uses food-imagery to suggest different inclinations likened to different digestive capability – "what one understands is what one can digest" – thus linking to the Upanishadic philosophy that food is power.

Fish is Sri Ramakrishna's favourite metaphor to suggest variety of attitudes and religious beliefs, akin to a mother's providing variety of fish-cuisine to each of her five children with equal love suiting each one's stomach.

Fish-bone is Sri Ramakrishna's metaphor for sin: "There are some fish which have many sets of bones, and others have one; ... so some men have many sins and others have few."

4.3. Variety and Diversity of Rasa to experience Ānanda

Sri Ramakrishna often says: "kakhana ekgheñye habi nā ('never be monotonous').

Variety of fish-cuisine is his metaphor for different modes of worship[45] through which he draws variety of spiritual Rasa.[46]

Taste – suggesting tongue – connects with Rasa,[47] food, Soma, Ānanda,[48] Vidyā (Sarasvatī), speech (Vāk/Śacī) and power.[49]

Thus, in Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy, the capacity to enjoy variety of Rasas with Ānanda is the true Vidyā – the power that takes one Beyond Avidyā or Māyā.

No doubt, what Sri Ramakrishna speaks is Amrita – Amrita-Vāk – Kathamrita.

4.4. Free Soul and Bound-Soul

Sri Ramakrishna uses fish-imagery as metaphors of different levels of being.

Only the big-fish can tear through God-fisherman's net of Māyā – Māyājāl, while bound-Jīvas attached to 'Kāminī Kāñcana' are like fish that make no attempt to escape, but fall deeper into the mud and live in the net with complacent happiness. The bound-soul is the fish that "makes pit and enters it," and does not come out despite having way.

A free soul unattached to senses and sensual pleasure is like "Pānkāl Māch" (mudfish), which lives in the mud but "is unsoiled and shining bright."

To Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda "is a red-eyed carp (among fishes), others are small fish, like minnows or small white fish."

He compares Sarada's hesitancy to marry with "a fish pulling the float of a fishing line," implying, a spiritual soul will not take the bait of fisherman-Kāma.

Sri Ramakrishna compares Dharmaśāstrik rituals with fish. Since, in Kali-Yuga man has 'no time' to perform detailed rituals, it is like "fish minus its head and tail."

5. Sri Ramakrishna's Kāminī Kāñcana discourse and Fish/ Fisherman

Sri Ramakrishna marks Kāminī Kāñcana as the foremost enemies to a spiritual life. Kāminī Kāñcana translates as Kāma-Artha – the

two of the Purushārthas, however with more significances than is apparent.

5.1. Kāminī as Fish/Fisherman Paradox

With reference to the Mahabharata, *Bhāgavat Purāna* and Vātsyāyana's Kāmasūtra,[50] Kāminī suggests sexually powerful woman, and sexuality-conscious woman's power that has manipulative potential[51] – and a woman without spiritual inclination can use that power against a man without spiritual inclination. Apsarā Pañcacūda, Yudhishthir, and Bhīshma equate woman with Mrityu, Buddhi, and fisherman capable of instigating big-fish Kāma.[52] In short, if a man is vulnerable to Kāma in his inner-self, he can be vulnerable to a sexually-manipulative woman as well.[53]

If a woman inclined to sexual-manipulation assumes the nature of "woman-fisherman,"[54] a man with disbalance of three Gunas can become a helpless victim like fish[55] to her – one probable reason why Sri Ramakrishna uses Kāma in feminine while teaching his male disciples on the necessity of conquering Kāma.

'Fish-sting' is Sri Ramakrishna's metaphor for the nature of his pain when touched by woman or money, or any metallic object, implying, Kāminī-Kāñcana isss fish with sting.

5.1.2. Kāminī: Significance

Kāminī is not every woman, but one who draws man to over-inclination to Kāma. However, for Sri Ramakrishna's disciples who would adopt Sannyasa for service to humankind, Kāminī is every woman – "For a man, woman is like tamarind pickles."

Sri Ramakrishna accepts the existential reality that "The desire for sensuous enjoyment is ever there... like the pitcher of water," "One can't find fault with this desire," however, "the patient wants to drink the whole pitcher of water!" – suggesting that Kāma becomes problematic when it creates the delusion of 'whole.' In other words,

when Kāma is not restrained in its 'one-fourth' place in the four Purusārthas (Dharma-Artha-Kāma-Moksha), and instead made to be 'all,' only then it becomes problematic.

5.2. Kāñcana

Kāñcana connotes gold, therefore Artha.

Over-inclination to Artha results in delusion of power, Āsurik nature[56] and unleashes Mātsyanyāya[57] – and Sri Ramakrishna exemplifies that through the story of the frog that owning a rupee is puffed with Ahamkāra to dare an elephant.

He sees that Grihastha man's existential reality is tangled in net of power that renders him helpless,[58] and over-inclination to Kāminī Kāñcana causes loss of mental power.[59]

Sri Ramakrishna – like Krishnadvaipāyana,[60] regards domestic life as the most convenient Āśrama,[61] and accepts balanced pursuit of Kāminī Kāñcana for Grihāśrama,[62] yet prescribes Sannyāsa as best for all to restore balance of Dharma-Artha-Kāma.

Kāminī Kāñcana are co-dependant and born of each other. Sri Ramakrishna exemplifies this through the story of the Brāhmanas of Jaipur, who lost their power over the king and became his dependant for money once they married.

Marriage becomes problematic for a Kāma-dominated man because he is bound to be subservient and slave to material needs more than spiritual needs, and therefore becomes Artha-centric – a disbalance of four Purushārthas.

6. Sri Ramakrishna's Spiritual Strategy- Upāya

The Mahabharata suggests balanced pursuit of Purusārthas to trap Kāma in Prajñā-fisherman's net.[63] Both Kāminī Kāñcana are fish/fisherman, and marking them as the foremost enemy, Sri Ramakrishna suggests the necessity to be fisherman – the "Eater of fish,"[64] and here he is Kali's Child, because in the Mahabharata,

fisherman-Goddess Pārvatī/Śakti defines Purusa as 'One who is prabhu yet free of Ahamkāra,'[65]– implying, conquerer of internal-'fish' is the true Purusa – or, big-fish/fisherman.

Vyāsa says, even fisherman needs upāya to catch fish (12.196.11), and Sri Ramakrishna suggests the same as a spiritual necessity in the tradition of the Mahabharata[66] – to fight enemy in his own game[67] – to remove a thorn by another thorn – Tamah by Sattva, or Rajah-Tamah by Sattva – and then discarding both, implying, his upāya is pragmatic, accepting the existential reality of the 'thorn.'

The 'eater of fish' Sri Ramakrishna's upāya are: recognizing Māyā, which will then "take flight, ashamed of itself;" analytical deconstruction of myth-sense about Kāminī Kāñcana;[68] actual Karma of simultaneous enjoyment and detatchment to destroy myth-sense;[69] taking Kāma in stride as normal and natural without attributing it over-importance and fixing it in its due one-third place;[70] using devotion as a sublimation-technique to avoid the trap of Ahamkāra by substituting the "'I' of Ahamkāra" to "'I' of knowledge/devotee,"and most importantly, assuming the nature of Māyā's fish/fisherman paradox to defeat Māyā's paradoxical power,[71] which includes assuming feminine self.[72]

The strategy of countering something by assuming its nature, is, in fact the same upāya – which the four Krishnas in the Mahabharata, particularly Vāsudeva-Krishna represents.

Sri Ramakrishna jokes about his seeking variety Rasa – "to eat fish prepared in all different ways" – and attributes it to his feminine nature.

In terms of fisherman's upāya this is very significant.

The fisherman-Gods/characters are ambisexual suggesting masculine-feminine balance. Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara, Vishnu as Mohinī,[73] Krishna,[74] and Arjuna as Brihannalā represent this principle. Even Purusa[75] and Prakriti cannot be interpreted simplistically as male and female because both are 'alingau.'[76]

Arjuna shows sexual restraint to Urvaśī and earns her curse – actually a boon in guise, and as Brihannalā, he lives amidst women yet with conquered Kāma.

Performance is implied in Vishnu's Mohinī-Avatāra (1.116),[77] etymology of 'Krishna,'[78] and his philosophy of lokasamgraham.[79]

Acting (performance) is false; however, if the performance relates to God then it gains true significance – as in the case of a Sri Ramakrishna's fisherman-thief, who took on the garb of a Sadhu to escape arrest, and when others took him to be a real Sadhu, he realized the necessity to "become a genuine sadhu."

7. Conclusion

Sri Ramakrishna salvages Dharma itself from the power-net of discourses – like a "benign-spiritual Fisherman" – and brings it down to everyday life – as if Dharma is as simple as our regular breath.

The "small-fish" is vulnerable in power-game, however, Sri Ramakrishna sees "God's consciousness... flashes in small-fish." Thus, he deconstructs absolutism of power in the Vedic tradition – reminding Utathya in the Mahabharata, who regards weakness as more powerful than power,[80] and Sulabhā who blasts Janaka's delusion of power by showing that power has dependency and insecurity lurking at its heart.[81]

Sri Ramakrishna's teachings are thus a great hope for the "small-fish" – both at self-level and social-level; and here he is the ideal "benign-spiritual fisherman" – also as Paramahamsa – the great swan that mythically separates milk from water, and more significantly – floats above water, therefore, above Mātsyanyāya.

Sri Ramakrishna's saying – "One, who says, I cannot be free, verily cannot be free...One, who exerts will to say, I am free, verily achieves freedom"[82] – is the clarion call of the fisherman against the 'inner script' created by Kāminī Kāñcana-fish.

Kāma is powerful because it can elude by assuming the "fish/fisherman" – paradox, however, one can defeat Kāma by assuming the same "fish/fisherman"-paradox in relation to Kāma with 'Buddhi' – and that is the central message in Sri Ramakrishna's fish and fisherman-imagery.

Notes and References

1 All quotes of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* taken from < http://www.kathamrita.org/>

2 The *Kularnava Tantra* explains this in the following verse: "Matsamāna sarva bhūte sukha duhkhamidam priye / iti yat Sāttvika Jñānam tan matsya Parikīrtitam" - "To offer fish in worship means to perceive Me (Śiva) equally in all and accept the duality of life like pleasure and pain with equanimity, by being established in pure knowledge (Sāttvikā Jñāna)"

3 One cannot resist the temptation here to find another reason in his 'accidental' connection with Rani Rashmoni who acted like a "Fisherman" to legally trap the British Government to force them to abolish fish-tax on poor fishermen.

4 I will henceforth refer to Mahabharata as 'Mbh.' All transcriptions of Sanskrit Texts used in this Paper are taken from Critical Edition of BORI from < http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gret_utf.htm>

5 See, for example, Mbh. 1.146.20c, 12.68.10-11, 12.140.28, 12.287.15, 12.289.16, 12.294.21, 12.295.25, and 12.169.11c

6 *Yajur Veda* 2.6.6; 5.5.13; *Atharva Veda* 11.2.25

7 Mbh.: See Yudhisthir (5.70.48), Arjuna (12.15), Prthivī (12.49.62), and Bhīsma's (Bharadvāja: 12.67; Brhaspati: 12.68) speeches for Mātsyanyāya Imagery. Brhaspati's discourse (12.68.8-14) clarifies that Mātsyanyāya and Food are imagery of Power, and 'eating' signifies the Powerful's exercise of Power over Powerless. Kautilya too – obviously influenced by Mbh. - speaks of Mātsyanyāya (1.4.13, 1.13.5). Vyāsa uses Fish-Imagery recurrently in the battle episodes (1.192.7@103.101; 5.158.38-40; 7.8.32; 7.44.6; 7.76.9; Drona Parvan.111; Karna Parvan.77 – etc.) – often comparing Krishna, Arjuna, Bhīma etc. with Fish.

8 Satapatha Brāhmana gives a very mystic description of Indra-Vritra combat in terms of 'food'. Vritra, once an 'eater', becomes victorious Indra's 'food'. On Vritra's plea, Indra does not kill Vritra, but divides him in two. From that part of Vritra which belonged to Soma Indra makes the moon, and that which is demonic, Indra puts into creatures as their stomach. 'And whenever these creatures get hungry they pay tribute to this Vritra, the stomach (SB 1.6.3.17).'

9 "The eater of food and food indeed are everything here".(SB 11.1.6.19)

10 See for example, Brihadāranyaka Upanishad -1.2.5; *Mundaka Upanishad* -1.1.8; *Praśna Upanishad* -1.4, 14; *Taittiriya Upanishad* - 1.5.3; 2.1.1

11 Mbh. 14.11.4-20

12 Mbh. 13.36; *Kauśitaki-Brāhmana Upanishad*: 4.20

13 Mbh., Krishna: 14.11.4-5; 14.12.11-14; Bhīma: 12.16.20-26; Bhīsma: 12.69.4

14 *Atharva Veda*- 10.4.18-19

15 *RigVeda* -1.125.2; 9.83.4; 7.82.215; 1.61.9; 10.32.6; 4.42.1; 10.133.6; 10.32.6

16 Homer compares Achilles (Iliad.21) and Ulysses (Odysseus.22) – with Fisherman; Zeus's son Perseus is brought up by a Fisherman; Moses' successor Joshua the Saviour, (Bible: Joshua 1:1-6) is a "Fish" because 'Nun', the name of the father of Joshua, is the Semitic word for fish. Fish is a symbol of Christ. In one prayer - 'Iesous Christos Theou Huios Soter (Jesus Christ, Son of God the Saviour)', the first letters of each word spell out ICTHS - the Greek word for fish. Christ is also the fisher, and the fishnet symbolizes the Christian sermon. Christ promised his followers: "I shall make ye fishers of men" (Matth. IV.19, Mark I.17, Luke V.10). Brhaspati equates Fisherman-King – arrestor of Mātsyanyāya – with Shepherd (12.68.13) - presaging the Transcultural Symbol of Shepherd – as in Krishna and Christ.

17 Mbh., Yājñavalka:12.306.71-72; Brihadāranyaka Upanishad - 4.3.18. Also Vishnu's first Avatāra is Fish – Mātsyāvatāra - first mentioned in *Śatapatha Brāhmana* (1.8.1.1-6) and also in details in Mbh.(3.185).

18 As transcendental God, Śiva is Fisherman being above Deva-Asura Mātsyanyāya. He is Fisherman as Kalpāntadhīvara. His Third Eye is in fact the Fisherman-eye, with which he burns Kāma to ashes. In Folk Tradition, Śiva bears Fish-mark' and takes birth as Fisherman to re-marry Pārvatī or Mīnāksī (Hiltebeitel 1988, 208). Vishnu is actual Fisherman Nishāda's 'forefather' (Mbh., 12.59), and as the highest twentififth Tattva (Vaśistha: 12.291.37) – is the most prominent Fisherman-God. In the *Mahābhāgavat Purāna*, Śiva takes birth as Radha, and Pārvatī's thundercloud complexioned form of Bhadrakālī descends to earth as Krishna. Thus, Krishna and Kali are one and same.

19 Mbh., 12.225.12-16; 230.19-20; 231.25; 237.32-33

20 kālah pacati bhūtāni sarvāny evātmanātmani / yasmims tu pacyate kālas tam na vedeha kaś cana. (12.231.25)

21 kālī strī (Mbh. 16.4.1)

22 kālapāśagrahām (Mbh. 16.6.6-11)

23 Alligator or Crocodile is often a substitute or extended metaphor for "Fish" in Mbh. Kāma-God is Makaradhvaja (*Brahmavaivarta Purana* -4.112.11). Krishna's son Pradyumna – incarnation of Kāma - has Makara standard (makaram ketum, Mbh. 3.18.2). Śambarāsura abducted Pradyumna and

threw him into the ocean where he was devoured by a Fish. Later, a Fisherman found him and brought him to Śambarāsura, whose wife Māyāvatī (actually Kāma's wife Rati) brought him up. Later, Pradyumna killed Śambarāsura. Interestingly, one meaning of Śambara is Fish.

[24] Shepherd-Fisherman Krishna's life ends at the hand of a Nishāda-Vyādha – Jarā, suggesting time and decreptitude – evoking the imagery of Mrtyu as Fisherman, and Jarā's feminine aspect connects with Kāla-Kali. Bhīsma describes Jarā as a woman (12.199.32@15_51-52). Mrtyu is the highest Fisherman, to whom even the Gods are Fishes (Chāndogya Upanishad -1.4.3). In RigVeda, Jarās is the most archaic word for 'old age,' possibly connected with the inherited √gr- 'to swallow, to devour' (Tucker 2002) – thus further connecting with Food Imagery, and therefore with Power.

[25] Mbh., Bhīsma: 12.290.62

[26] Mbh., Vyāsa: 12.242.12-14; Vidura: 5.34.6326; Gāndhārī: 5.127.3026; Brihadāranyaka Upanishad -3.2.7

[27] Gita- 2.62; 14.9; 16.10, 14, 18; 17.5; 18.53. Being born of Kāma-Fish, Ahamkāra is Fish by implication.

[28] Mbh., 12.289.11-18

[29] Yājñavalka Upanishad- 20-21; *Mahā Upanishad* - 3.45-46

[30] Fish symbolizes higher beings - the Yogī (12.289.12), and one whose soul has been cleansed by knowledge so that his track cannot be marked by any (12.231.24; 174.19) Fish also represents the Soul unaffected by the world of senses, Sattva-Rajah- Tamah or Prakrti (Yājñavalka: 12.303.15; Bhīsma: 12.187.37c; Vyāsa: 12.240.20-22). In Krishna's boon to Bhīsma, eye of Fish in limpid stream symbolizes the vision of knowledge (Bhīsma draksyasi tattvena jale mīna ivāmale, 12.52.21c).

[31] Mbh., 12.289.11-18

[32] Mbh., Vyāsa: 12.232.12-15; 12.287.31; Maitri Upanishad- 26

[33] Mbh., Gāndhārī: 5.127.30; Vidura: 5.34.64; *Mahā Upanishad* 6.31-32

[34] Arjuna becomes Fisherman of Ksatriyas with Brahmaśira and Pāśupata, acting like a Fisherman in respect to a crocodile to rescue Drona from its grasp (1.123), and by assuming the role of Vyādha prior to pleasing Śiva who appeared in the form of Kirāta-Vyādha. In another occasion, he rescues three Apsarās from cursed life of crocodiles (1.208-209). Arjuna's prowess over crocodiles foreshadows his triumph over Ksatriyas-crocodiles in Śiśumāra-Pāñcāla (Mbh. 1.176.15). Śiśumāra means both 'childkiller' and 'crocodile.'

[35] The three Gunas are themselves in a relation of Power (Gita- 14.10) – evoking the imagery of Mātsyanyāya among the Triple-Gunas.

[36] Vyādha is also "Fisherman" in the extended sense, because Fisherman is also hunter. Another point of commonality is Nishāda – who is both Vyādha and Fisherman.

[37] Rāmāyana: tasmāt tu mithunād ekam pumāmsam pāpaniścayah / jaghāna vairanilayo Nishādas tasya paśyatah (1.2.10); mā Nishāda pratisthām tvam agamah śāśvatīm samāh / yat krauñcamithunād ekam avadhīh kāmamohitam (1.2.14)

[38] Krishnadvaipāyana is both Fish/Fisherman – his mother Satyavati was born in the womb of a Fish (1.57) (Matsya Purana mentions Vyāsa as matsyayoni [14.13]), and a Fisherman's foster daughter. Born of Brāhmana father (Rsi Parāśara) and Śūdra mother, Vyāsa is Pāraśava (13.48.5) – thus closely related to Nishāda – the actual 'literal' Fisherman (see, "Asiatic journal and monthly miscellany, Volume 2" [Wm. H. Allen & Co., 1816, pg-574])

[39] Christ is also 'Shepherd.' The 'Shepherd' and "Fisherman" are thus similar imagery.

[40] Risi Dattātreya in *Bhāgavat Purāna*

[41] "How may we find our God? The angler, anxious to hook a big and beautiful Rohitta-fish, waits calmly for hours together, having thrown the bait and the hook into the water, watching patiently until the bait is caught by the fish. Similarly, the devotee who patiently goes on with his devotions is sure at last to find his God."

[42] "When Arjuna pierced his target, his sight was fixed only on the eye of the fish he was not looking at anything else. So much so that he was not able to see any other organ (of the fish) but the eye. In such a state, one's breathing stops and one attains the state of kumbhak."

[43] "A string with a hook is attached to a bent bamboo pole. Bait is tied to the hook."

[44] "Just as water is life for fish, Mādhava is my life breath."

[45] "How can I be narrow and one-sided? I eat fish cooked in several different forms – sometimes fish in curry, sometimes spiced, sometimes with tamarind and at times fried or baked."

[46] The *Taittiriya Upanishad* (2.7.1) says: raso vai sah, Rasam hi evāyam labdhvānandī bhavati" - "He is the essence, by obtaining That all this also will become happy."

[47] The 'word without utterance' (tayor api ca ghosinyor nirghosaiva garīyasī) yields diverse meanings like 'cow' yielding Rasa (Krishna: gaur iva prasravaty esā rasam uttamaśālinī, Mbh., 14.21).

[48] See for example Sri Aurobindo's explanation in his "The secret of the Veda" (Aurobindo Ashram Publication Dept, 01-Jan-2006, pg-103)

[49] In *Atharva Veda* 5.7.5 Mbh (12.231.8) and in the Brāhmanas Sarasvatī is directly associated with Vāk as Vāk-Sarasvatī. Sarasvatī is not only goddess of Vidyā, but also of Bala – Power. 'Sarasvati comes wherever she is invoked by the powerful (āhūtā balavadbhir hi tatra tatra sarasvatī)' (9.37.3). Like Indra she kills Vritra - indramna Vritratūrye (RV--6.61.2, 6.61.5). She is

'Vritraghnī' (RV-6.61.7). In Mbh., Sarasvatī enters Yājñavalka through his mouth (12.306.7-8) and produced a burning sensation. Sarasvatī assumes Agni-nature to purify. After that, the whole Vedas and Upanishads appear to Yājñavalka in an inner light (12.306.9-12) – suggesting Sarasvatī is the Vidyā of inner light. That Saraswati enters through the mouth connects her with food. This associates her with Time who devours all and is an 'eater'- and therefore with Kāla/Kali. Sarasvatī is thus the Vidyā-aspect of Kāla-Time or Kali.

[50] In Mbh., Subhadrā (1.2.92), and in *Bhāgavat Purāna* (10.30.33) Radha are called Kāminī. In *Bhāgavat Purāna* (5.24.16), Kāminī is one of the three kinds of women (svairinī, kāminī and pumścalī) created by the demon Bala. The kāminīs marry men from any group, and intoxicate men with their sexuality so that "illusioned and intoxicated by false pride, he thinks himself God, ignoring impending death." At *Bhāgavat Purāna* 10.20.17, Kāminī suggests 'lusty women unfaithful even to virtuous men.' Vātsyāyana's Kāmasūtra uses the word twice; in the first case, one who initially hides her feelings, and later takes on the masculine role expressing love and desire freely (2.8.39); and in the second case, Kāminī is a ganikā's daughter, who observes marriage tie for one year and then does what she likes (pāni-grahaś ca samvatsaram a:vyabhicāryas tato yathā kāminī syāt, 7.1.21).

[51] In Rāmāyana, Kaikeyī's Self-conscious sexuality - with which she manipulates Daśaratha - is suggested by the use of the word Bala (tmano balam jñāya).

[52] Mbh., 13.38-40

[53] Bharata Muni in his Nātyaśāstra, compares two types of Sexually-Manipulative women with Fish - matsyasattvā jalapriyā (22.127), and krūrā matsyagunairyutā (22.130)

[54] *Mahā Upanishad* 6.31-32

[55] The Greek poet Ovid also compares woman with Fisherman (Art of Love, Book-3). Shakespeare also compares a seductress woman with Fisherman. In his play Antony and Cleopatra, Cleopatra imagines herself as a Fisherman catching 'Antony-Fish!' (Act-II, Scene-5)

[56] Krishna categorises human beings into two – Deva and Asura – dvau bhūtasargau loke 'smin daiva āsura eva ca (16.6). He makes a clear distinction between Deva and Asura nature (Gita-16.3-4), saying dambha, darpa, Krodha, and Ajñānam are surik. Asura is over-inclined to Artha (Bhīsma: 12.110.21) and dominated by Raja-Tamah Guna (12.209.18). Krishna says Asuras seek Artha by unlawful means for the fulfillment of Kāma – kāmabhogārtham anyāyenārthasamcayān (16.12-15). Asuras are deceitful persons (Bhīsma: 12.110.20-25), abandoner of Svadharma (20), and are actually at war with himself – an idea also propounded in Iśa-Upanishad (3). Bhīsma marks discontent as the cause of ambition, because Trsnā blazes up more with every acquisition (12.173.23-25)'. Trsnā also manifests in over-inclination to Artha.

[57] Rsi Vaśistha compares Turvaśo Purolā's urge to win wealth with 'fishes urged by hunger'- purolā it turvaśo yaksurāsīd rāye matsyāso niśitā apīva (RV-7.18.6) - showing how over-inclination to Artha entangles one in Power-Game – akin to Mātsyanyāya.

[58] "Worldly life has so many problems. 'If the householder comes this way, he is hit with a stick and if he goes that way, he is beaten with a broom. If he follows another way, someone throws a shoe at him!"

[59] "Do you know what happens when you live as a householder? A lot of your mental powers are unnecessarily expended. This wastage of mental powers can be made up only by embracing sannyasa."

[60] In the Brahmā-Ganesha-Vyāsa myth in Mbh., Brahmā says –viśesane grhasthasya śesās traya ivāśramāh (01,001.062d@001_0036)

[61] Sri Ramakrishna sees spiritual opportunity for householders because "it is more convenient to fight a battle from within the fort." From within this Fort, one should enjoy life with 'spiritual disciplines,' and then "quickly give up one article of enjoyment after the other. Once I had a desire to wear a golden chain around my waist. I even got one and put it on – but I took it off immediately."

[62] In Mbh., Dharma-Yudhisthir and Śrī-Draupadī's marriage is an allegory of the Wisdom that Artha should be 'wedded' to Dharma; for example, See, Mbh. 1.60.12-14; 12.59.133-134a; 12.59.133-134 for significance of Pāndava-Draupadī marriage; and 12.91.24-25 for significance of Duryodhana as surik-Artha. Thus: Dharma+ Śrī = Śrī-Artha = Indra-Artha = arrestor of Mātsyanyāya = aim of Arthaśāstra; Adharma+ Śrī = Darpa-Artha that propels Mātsyanyāya = Vritra-Artha = Āsurik Power.

[63] For example, Vidura says that Kāma and Krodha can sometimes 'break through prajñāna's Net just as a large fish breaks through a net of thin cords unless Prajñā is strengthened with balanced pursuit of Purusārthas (Vidura: 5.34.63-64).

[64] 'Manasādindriya grāmam samyamyātmani yojayet/ Matsyāsi sa bhavet devi itare Prānī ghātakāh' – *Kularnava Tantra*

[65] prabhavan yo 'nahamvādī sa vai purusa ucyate (Mbh., 13.134.13)

[66] Vyāsa considers Upāya-achieved victory the best - upāyavijayam śrestham (6.4.31-32). True Upāya is different from Māyā though it may use Māyā (Bhīsma: upāyān prabravīmy etān na me māyā vivaksitā, 12.89.12). In RigVeda, true Power is moral strength that Māyāvī Vritra lacks (e.g. RV-1.32.6; 1.123.5; 4.54.3; 8.68.3). True Upāya must have Dharma as its motive. Upāya is necessary for high spiritual gain (Manu, in Bhīsma's narrative: 12.196.10-14). Yoga is attainable through proper Upāya -vaśyātmanā tu yatatā śakyo 'vāptum upāyatah (Gita-6.36).' True Upāya is attainable only to the Yogī or wise person or Fisherman. Yudhisthir praises Krishna for his prajñā, policy, power, and Upāya (2.18.19; 12.43.2).

67 In Mbh. Bhīsma and Vidura states: 'One should, in any matter, behave towards another as that other behaves in that matter (12.110.26; 5.37.7).'

68 "Whoever contemplates the lotus feet of God sees even the most beautiful woman as ash from a cremation fire. To enjoy a body which will not last and which contains all kinds of impurities – worms, pus, phlegm and so on! Don't you feel ashamed of yourself?" Here he is in the Upanishadik tradition – as *Mahā Upanishad* suggests the same (3.39-40).

69 "I ate some onion and began to discriminate in this way – my mind, this is what is called onion. I moved it around in my mouth for awhile, first on one side and then on the other. I spat it out after making it touch the mouth on all sides."

70 To his domestic disciples, Sri Ramakrishna suggests a cautious life because "However clever you may be, you will get a black stain on your body if you live in a room of lampblack." He suggests: "But there is no harm if a man of knowledge cohabits with his wife occasionally. Discharge of semen is just like other eliminations – defecation, urine, and so on. After answering the call of nature, a person forgets all about it."

71 This is evident in Sri Ramakrishna's liking of Ramprasad's song "O Kali! I am going to devour You this time..." Here the mystics want to assimilate Kali in them – as the 'eating' suggests – to absorb Kali's Power or Śakti to defy Yama-Kāla or Mrtyu, and the mystic saying of rubbing Yama-Kāla's face with Black is indeed the very spiritual strategy that Krishnas of Mbh. signify, that is, to assume the nature of Black with White-Motive to face and fight Black Kali Yuga. However, Mrtyu is inevitable for man, so the mystics defy Mrtyu-Yama-Kāla by ultimately taking shelter with Kali-Fisherman as Fish. Sri Ramakrishna loved to sing one Ramprasad's song, in which he wants to be a Fish to Kali-Kite and says: "Hurt by Your claws, O All-Blissful Mother, when I quit this mortal frame,/ Kindly grant me, then, both of Your red feet."

72 Sri Ramakrishna says: "What man desires, it is already with him. Yet, he wanders from place to place!" Thus if man has Kāma for Kāminī, it logically suggests that Kāminī is already within him. In other words, the Feminine is already within man, yet he craves for the feminine 'outside'- and that is what attaches him to Kāminī Kāñcana. Sri Ramakrishna's thoughts presage C. Jung, and Lacan. It is his unique philosophy - "You can change your nature by imitating something. If you cultivate a feminine nature, you gradually slay enemies like lust." He practiced this principle in his own life. "How can one conquer the senses? One should assume the feminine attitude. For a long time, I had the attitude of a maidservant of God. I used to dress myself like a woman and wore jewelry and a scarf on my head. I would perform arati with my head covered. Had I not, how could I have kept my wife with me for eight months? Both of us were the maid companions of the Divine Mother!" What Sri Ramakrishna suggests is that one needs Masculine-Feminine Balance,

and awareness of Feminine is necessary for awareness of the Masculine – as he tells Keśava Candra Sen: "He who is aware of manhood is also aware of womanhood." In short, one inclines to Kāminī Kāñcana owing to Masculine-Feminine Disbalance tilting to Masculine, which can be negated and Balance of Purusārthas restored by cultivating the Feminine Essence in one's Self. The Feminine is not the 'constructed' feminine of patriarchy –synonym with weakness. Mbh. says, woman has the Prajñā-Fisherman aspect, having Prajñā in her speech (Pañcacūda: prājñasya purusasyeha yathā vācas tathā striyah, 13.38.24c); they also have 'sharp' courage (Bhīsma: tīksnās tīksnaparākramāh, 13.43.22c). Exploring the Feminine to restore Masculine-Feminine Balance is thus Prajñā and Courage – that manifests in dharmavyatikrama (Gautama Dharmasūtra- 1.1.3) and Tejo (*Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*-2.6.13.7)

[73] Mbh., 1.16.39-40

[74] Gita-14.3- 4; 5.63.3

[75] Brihadāranyaka Upanishad conceives Paramātmā as Feminine/Female – who like 'priyayā striyā' embraces tmā-husband (4.3.21) Mbh., Vyāsa: 12.210.7; alingau means 'absence of external gender-signs'

[76] Mbh., Vyāsa: 12.210.7; alingau means 'absence of external gender-signs'

[77] Vishnu being the deity of Sattva Guna, such Performance with Dharma-motive is perhaps Sāttvikā Abhinaya – the superior Abhinaya, Bharata Muni mentions. Interestingly, Bharata Muni's compares the Stage with Fish (matsyaprstham tathaiva ca, 2.72).

[78] Krishna suggests Harsa (5.68.9), Vārttā (5.68.5), and performance (acting and entertaining). Krishna is an entertainer (abhivinodayan, 12.29.6).

[79] Gita- 3.25/ Mbh. 6.25.25 a non-attached man has to act like attached man for teaching others

[80] Utathya says in Mbh. – 'Weakness is more powerful than even the greatest Power, for that Power which is scorched by Weakness becomes totally exterminated - abalam vai balāc chreyo yac cātibalavad balam / balasyābaladagdhasya na kim cid avaśisyate (12.92.16).'

[81] Mbh., 12.308.140-161

[82] Also in *Astāvakragītā* - "muktābhimānī mukto hi baddho baddhābhimānyapi kimvadantīha satyeyam yā matih sā gatirbhavet (1.11)." See, Indrajit Bandyopadhyay, 'The Inner Script and Sri Ramakrishna'. < http://www.boloji.com/index.cfm?md=Content&sd=Articles&ArticleID=1675 >

Sri Ramakrishna and the Concept of Truth

Mahitosh Mandal

I. Worship of Truth

Ramakrishna emphasized the need for holding on to truth under any circumstances, an idea which immensely influenced Swami Vivekananda, his greatest disciple who later said that one can leave everything for truth but truth should never be left for anything. In fact, Ramakrishna has identified truth as the only subject of worship for people living in the Kaliyug[1], for other forms of worship are difficult in this age.

This remarkable emphasis on truth as an important vehicle towards peaceful existence and realization of God begs a few questions. How far should one stick to truth in a world based on the notion of survival of the fittest? Isn't it that, in order to live on, one should be clever and act according to a given situation? Isn't it that, at times, truth may be so harsh as to become unsayable? Is it always possible to tell the truth? How far is religious truth understandable or provable? Can there be a fixed, absolute, ultimate truth, since everything depends on interpretation? This paper is an attempt to explore these issues and solve the relevant problems.

II. Problems with the Idea of Truth

Metis

The Greek god Zeus was very strongly built and could vanquish all his enemies by his sheer physical strength. But he had a problem. He was not that clever. He would like to have affairs with many

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goddesses and nymphs. But his extremely clever wife, *Metis*,[2] would prevent him from betraying her, for she had an uncanny ability to find out her husband's intentions. Zeus, therefore, was very much uncomfortable. So what did he do? He ate up *Metis* and thus became the embodiment of strength combined with cleverness. He became as strong as a lion and as clever as a fox. He became the master of the world.

The word *Metis*, gradually, began to denote any kind of cleverness which was adapted to live in a comfortable way, or as a means to survive. In the animal world, octopus and fox are representative users of *metis*, since they use deception to get their prey or food. Otherwise they cannot survive.

The concept of *metis* was remarkably used in Greek comedy which emphasized the need for survival even at the cost of telling lies. In Aristophanes' *Frogs*, we find how the god Dionysus disguises himself, deceives many characters and does not remain true to his promise of bringing Euripides back to the world (instead, he brings Aeschylus). But all these he does in order to bring peace to the chaotic Athenian universe. Unlike tragedy which involves dying for a cause or truth heroically, comedy involves living on, albeit cleverly.

Surviving cleverly is also the need for the artist in the modernist era. The life of an artist is in danger at this point. Like Charles Baudelaire's albatross or like Stephen in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in order to survive, the artist needs to adapt 'silence, exile, and cunning'.

The adaptation of *metis* as the sole means for survival raises disturbing issues involving how far one can, confronting crisis of existence, stick to certain fixed ideals like notions of truth.

Thus goes the story of an old man caught in a dilemma. There was an old man in a village very much loved by the villagers. The man was also very rich. One day a group of robbers looted his house.

He could actually recognize the robbers. The robbers threatened him by saying that they would go and rob all people in the village, but if he revealed their identity, they would immediately kill him. What should this man do now? Should he save all the villagers by cautioning them? In that case he would have to die. Or should he keep his mouth shut, so as to save his own life? Should he tell the truth or should he rather suppress the truth?

Truth Unfavorable

Truth may also be unfavorable at times. That which is true may not always be comfortable to hear. An *apriya-satya*, or a truth that is not dear to one, may trigger uneasiness. Suppose a very dear friend of mine has failed in an important examination. I happen to be at the notice board which displays the result. He telephones me and asks me to tell him the result. What do I do? Should I tell him the truth that he has failed, even though I know it very well that the news may cause him nervous breakdown? Harsh truths or hard facts are sometimes to be avoided. This issue complicates the need to stick to truth.

To some extent, to live is to live through deliberately being unaware of certain hard facts like the inevitability of death. Especially for those who do not believe in an afterlife, death becomes a horrible experience. As for the existentialists, life is a meaningless struggle to create meaning since no struggle whatsoever can prevent the coming of death. It is a bit like an onion which has many layers to hide emptiness within it. This emptiness, this void symbolizes the meaninglessness of life since every being covers a nonbeing, and falsely tries to construct meaning out of life which hides death or non-life.

In this sense, keeping the truth aside becomes a need to give meaning to life. It's a bit like living in an illusion knowingly or unknowingly. How far can Ramakrishna's principle of practicing truth be justified in this context?

The Serpent and the Rope

Again truth may be something which needs to be deciphered, or arrived at, by means of proper observation or understanding. Truth needs to be arrived at through scientific experiments. The biblical theory of genesis, in this sense, was rejected by Charles Darwin[3] since this theory could not be scientifically proved. Apart from Darwin, Western thinkers like Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud have always been suspicious of religious truth. Marx has, for example, said that religion does not contain any truth in it. Rather, religion asks people to prepare themselves well for the other-world, thus exploiting them in this world. Religion is, for Marx, 'opium of the masses'[4]. Freud has also attacked religion by calling it 'mass delusion'[5]. It is like calling the rope a serpent and repeatedly refusing to accept the rope as rope, refusing to accept the fact that there is no other world, that religion is merely an 'ideological state apparatus', as the Marxist thinker Louis Althusser says.

Many-headed Truth

Again truth may be multifaceted. Akira Kurosawa, a great Japanese film director, in his film *Rashomon* remarkably highlights this particular characteristic of truth. The truth about the murder of a samurai is stated through four different narratives: the bandit's story, the wife's story, the samurai's story, the woodcutter's story. All the stories are conveyed in a convincing manner. And it appears that all of them are true. This multiplicity of true versions conspicuously draws our attention to the fact that the notion of a fixed, singular truth is a myth. Every truth is manifested through plural forms and truth is structured like a fiction in so far as it resists all factual fixations. But this also begs the question: is there any ultimate truth? Isn't it that all truths are just *interpretations*?

III. Ramakrishna and the Reaffirmation of the Idea of Truth

Satyam and *Ritam*

In Ramakrishna's philosophy, there is a difference between truth perceived and truth practiced[6]. *Ritam* is truth perceived yet not practiced. We perceive that childhood gives way to youth and youth to old age. Tree sheds leaves for newer leaves. Flower gives way to fruit, fruit to seeds. Truth is here related to sacrifice. Truth practiced in this manner is *satyam*. Satyam is not mere verbal truth but it is also mental and physical truth. To live in accordance with truth is to live in conformity with nature. But most of us do not or cannot live in conformity with nature. We are afraid of sacrificing things. We are for ourselves. Selfishness and hedonism demand us to tell lies, and in no way can our response to this narrow demand make us great.

Metis and Western Civilization

Regarding the practice of cunning, Swamiji famously said that 'no *great* work can be done by means of sheer cunning'. To live is to live for others and that is the great task. Mere survival, for which *metis* becomes so much necessary, is absolutely unimportant, since life is to live like a flame, to live like a man among men. The philosophy of life, to which the concept of *metis* is related, thus, is revealed to be shallow. One needs to live like a hero, never caring for mere survival. One should learn to hate a life which is defined by mere acquiring of wealth and fame. One should actually learn anew what it means to live.

Again the question of cunning as we find in Baudelaire and Joyce is to be thought of as a product of the problematic aspects of Western civilization. The artistic exile or silence inevitably results from the Western man's inability to come to terms with his own people. T. S. Eliot famously called this civilization a 'Waste Land'. But we must not forget that Eliot actually gave a solution to this problematic use of 'metis'. He ends his poem *The Waste Land* in these words: *Shanti*

Shanti Shantih. This means one needs to go beyond the narrowness of the concept of *metis,* one needs to look back to the *Upanishads* and learn the difference between living and surviving.

The concept of survival of the fittest, again, is based on the concept of fighting and not on cooperation. In a Darwinian universe, the strong persons acquire the power to kill the weak. This killing instinct can only cause a quick destruction and chaos.

How to Tell Even an Unfavorable Truth

One has to know *how* to tell even an unfavorable truth. One who has a nervous breakdown because of failure in an examination is first of all a victim of a society which puts too much emphasis on material success. Once Subhas Bose wrote to his father telling him how tensed he was to appear for the ICS examination. His father wrote back that ICS was just one of the many formal and informal tests Subhas would have to take in course of his life. He should therefore not be that tensed for this particular test. We also know that Vivekananda was never worried about exams. We need to inculcate Ramakrishna's philosophy of life as practiced by Vivekananda or Subhas Bose in this context.

Again, one needs to be brave and courageous to tell the truth like the little boy in Nirendranath Chakraborty's *The Naked King* who dared to ask the king 'O king, where are your clothes?' or like Satyakam who never felt worried about his dark past and dared to tell the truth about his birth, a truth that would have been suppressed by any ordinary individual.

Western Misconception of Religious Truth

We must remember the language in which a Darwin or a Marx or a Freud speaks is the language of science or reason. First of all, when they are talking about religion, they have only the abuses of Christianity in mind. Secondly, they themselves have a very

little and vague understanding of religious truth. Any kind of understanding involves the mediation of language. And language is the language of reason. But not all truths, except material or scientific truth, can be understood through language. Certain truths are just to be felt, experienced or realized, and cannot be understood or conveyed through language. We can think of examples like the ecstasy of St. Teresa or Ramakrishna's vision of Mother Kali. Experiencing of religious truth usually excludes the possibility of it being understandable or communicable through language. The three Western thinkers in question cannot actually go beyond the analytical use of language. Hence they can only misinterpret true religion or religious truth.

Moreover, the language of myth or tales may very well convey religious truth. Numerous tales told by Ramakrishna very well proves this. At times faith itself may lead one to truth. Faith is solely responsible for achieving the goal.

One concept seems to be important, yet neglected by these Western thinkers, with reference to the idea of religious truth: faith and devotion. Remember Martha and Mary in the New Testament? Their brother Lazarus died and after he was buried, there arrived Jesus. They had so much faith in Jesus that they said had Jesus been there when Lazarus was dying, Lazarus would never have died. Jesus said 'you believe that I could save your brother from death?' With tears, they said they did. Jesus then went to the grave and said 'Lazarus, come forth!'[7] Lazarus did come forth, behold, he was actually resurrected! For these two sisters, faith alone was sufficient to let them discover the religious truth. Ramakrishna said 'Faith is enough to reveal the religious truth. One can of course arrive at this truth through questioning or Jnanayoga [think of the doubting Paul in the New Testament]. But it is easier to follow the path of devotion and faith'[8].

Ramakrishna and the Multiverse of Truth

Concerning the many-headed character of truth, Ramakrishna himself has said 'as many views so many paths' or 'one Ram with thousand names'.[9] But he hastily added that all paths are true, that one will arrive at the same place whichever path one selects, that the same Lord Ram will respond by whatever name one calls, or prays to, Him. The point is not to feel frustrated because there are so many versions of truth. The point, rather, is to choose one out of all these versions of truth and live up to it, without disrespecting other versions.

Notes and References

1 *Amritabani* (Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture: Golpark), 6 [My translation]

2 Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society* Trans. Janet Lloyd, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991

3 See Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, London: John Murray, 1859

4 See Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1843] 1970

5 Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, New York, Horace Liverlight, 1928

6 I am indebted to Swami Suparnananda Maharaj for enlightening me on this point

7 John 11:44, The King James Version of the Holy Bible, 618, www.davince.com/bible

8 *Amritabani*, 4

9 *Amritabani*, 4

Sri Ramakrishna's Love for Visual Devotional Art

Anirban Ray

Anecdotes and accounts left by devotees and writers reveal that Sri Ramakrishna derived immense spiritual joy from observing *jatra* (Bengali plays having occasional religious themes from epics and *purānas*), and also from meditating upon pictures and sculptures of Hindu divinities. Religion has always been one of the most significant shaping influences behind the gradual evolution and enrichment of the multifaceted arts of India, and Sri Ramakrishna traced the united harmony of spirituality and aesthetics in art. In my article I shall attempt an exploration of the aspects of Sri Ramakrishna's love for visual devotional arts, and his ideas regarding the significance of art as a process of veneration, based on the valuable information available in the spiritually enlightening *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* "as stated by" Sri M. and edited by Mrityunjoy Bhattacharyya; Swami Tejasananda's much-read *A Short Life of Sri Ramakrishna*; the revered study of the mystic's life, *Paramaradhya Sri Sri Ramakrishna* by Mrinalkanti Dasgupta, and the fervently written epical biography, *Parampurus Sri Sri Ramakrishna*, by Achintyakumar Sengupta.

Hinduism is a synthesis of both monotheistic and polytheistic ideas. As Veronica Ions has noted, the basic principle is the belief in the *Brahman*, the "universal divine spirit" that is everlasting, "without beginning or end" (Ions: 36). Marta Jakimowicz-Shah notes that the *Brahman* is the "abstract principle" which eludes any sensory perception or interpretation; it is the "source" of

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all emanations, and also the "essence" of the existence of varied divinities with individually distinguishing attributes and elaborate mythic roles, and also of all living species (Jakimowicz-Shah: 1). Devotional art attempts to represent these mystic, incomprehensible forms in a manner accessible through senses. Sri Ramakrishna similarly realized that the sight of a form (a painting or a sculpture of a deity) enables the mind to be focused upon it for veneration and meditation (Sengupta: 401). Keshab Chandra Sen, who was the guiding figure behind the Brahmo Samaj, had expressed his intolerance towards idol-worship initially (Wikipedia contributors). We learn from Sengupta that Sri Ramakrishna lucidly explained to Keshab and others that the represented form inspires devotion, while the cosmic shapelessness can be perceived through higher wisdom; through gradual ascension through devotion, one can finally envision "*jyoti*," the divine light or cosmic energy, when no longer any form remains (Sengupta: 218). Gradually moved by Sri Ramakrishna's simple, yet wise explanations of complex issues of Hinduism, and his affectionate and fervent nature, Keshab turned more liberal towards the belief in multiple deities of the Hindu pantheon (Wikipedia contributors).

As Jakimowicz-Shah notes, both the arts of producing paintings and sculpting figures of divinities are perceived highly as activities having religious significance in Indian theology, aesthetics and culture: prior to any act of image-making of a particular deity, the artist is required to perceive in his/her mind the distinguishing qualities of the divine object of his/her art (Jakimowicz-Shah: 19). By producing images meant for later veneration by worshippers, he/she connects the divine realm with the earthly realm – hence both the priest and the artist provide similar service to the worshippers and the devotees (Jakimowicz-Shah: 19). Thus Jakimowicz-Shah observes that the artist is adored as the earthly equivalent of the omnipotent Creator Brahma and his/her art-making is perceived as similar to the cosmic action of the Creation of the Universe

(Jakimowicz-Shah: 19, 1). In Bengal the *potuas* (the painters of religious themes on canvas) and the *kumors* (the sculptors of *protimas*, or clay idols) are much revered traditional artists. It is hence not surprising that the child Gadadhar (young Sri Ramakrishna) was attracted towards the professions of painting and idol-making; he was often found amidst the *potuas* and the *kumors* (Sengupta: 14-15; Dasgupta: 17, 31-32). It was not only his attempt at learning the devotional art through observation of the arts practiced by elders, but was also an indication of his blossoming spiritualism and initiation into the sacred realm.

The budding talent of sculpting visible in the child Gadadhar reached perfection in his youth and from Dasgupta we learn in detail about the famous event of Gadadhar's sculpting of an idol of Shiva that eventually influenced his appointment in the Dakshineswar temple (Dasgupta: 61-65). In Dakshineswar, once in a tranquil mood Gadadhar felt an urge of creating idol by using the clay moistened by the sacred waters of the Ganges (Dasgupta: 61). After his nephew Hriday fulfilled his request by providing him with his chosen art medium, Gadadhar sought creative joy in sculpting a beautiful image of Shiva, and poured his entire soul into his art (Dasgupta: 61). Rani Rashmoni's son-in-law, Mathuramohan Biswas was so impressed by the finished perfection of the sculpture that he requested Gadadhar to give it to him (Dasgupta: 62). The request was granted and Mathurbabu showed it to Rani Rashmoni, proposing the appointment of Gadadhar as the decorator of the idol of Bhavatarini in the newly constructed temple at Dakshineswar (Dasgupta: 62). His priestly role and spiritual journey there thus started as an artist, with his creative impulse. The quiet contemplation of the youthful artist; his complete immersion in the sacred art; Hriday's heartfelt devotion in adoring the completed idol with wild flowers and fruits, cleared the doubts in Mathurbabu's mind regarding the pure and pious characters of Gadadhar and his nephew (Dasgupta: 61-62). Mathurbabu must have perceived that the hands which could sculpt

such a beautiful image would surely be able to decorate the idol of the Divine Mother in an artistic way tinged with devotion. Entrusted with the job, Gadadhar adorned the idol with sandal-paste, flowers, decorating it with organic beauties of nature (Dasgupta: 65). The act of decorating, like sculpting, is also another manifestation of artistic fervour and pure devotional earnestness, and Gadadhar did it every day with all his heart (Dasgupta: 61-65).

An artist not only knows how to skillfully create an object of devotion but also knows how to mend it if any error was visible in an artwork. We can all recall the much-loved event of Gadadhar's (Sri Ramakrishna's) mending of the broken leg of the idol of Govinda, or Krishna, in the Dakshineswar temple, when it was accidentally broken by the priest Khetranath (Dasgupta: 66-70; Tejasananda: 26-27). Against all orthodox scriptural regulations forwarded by the highly learned Vaishnavacharyas urging for the immediate immersion of the broken idol, Gadadhar argued, stunning the wise men, that just as a fractured human leg requires prompt medical treatment, the idol could be re-installed following the attachment of the broken leg to the idol (Dasgupta: 67-68; Tejasananda: 27). Requested by Rani Rashmoni to mend the leg, Gadadhar, by virtue of his skill of sculpting, attached the leg so perfectly that no trace of previous brokenness could be detected (Dasgupta: 68-70; Tejasananda: 26-27). Such artistic feat could only result from a talent of the highest order. Sri Ramakrishna's logic is both devotionally tinged and pragmatic. We all try to have prayer rooms in our homes if we can afford, if we cannot, we feel satisfied placing our idols and/or pictures of deities in a small shrine in a corner. We offer daily *puja*; we pray in times of despair and/or urgency. The *puja* room or the shrine in the corner becomes a sacred space; we consider the pictorial representations of divinities and/or idols not merely as material objects but as media of intense spiritual communication. These devotedly created art objects represent sources of our strength and comfort; these become parts of our families and daily lives.

The fact that Sri Ramakrishna felt a deep longing for devotional pictures was manifested by the expression of his wish to visit Nanda Bose, after hearing from his devotees about the collection of images of deities in Bose's house (Sri M.: 552). The four walls of the large hall were adorned with pictures of various male and female divinities of the Hindu pantheon (Sri M.: 552-553). With the collection of religious pictures in his hall, Bose had turned the private domestic room to a shrine-like purified space. When Sri Ramakrishna entered the hall with his devotees, the group was pleased to find pictures like those of four armed Vishnu, Sri Ram blessing Hanuman, Vamana, or the dwarf incarnation of Vishnu, Narasimha, or the zoomorphic lion-headed incarnation of the same, and Krishna among the cowherds (Sri M.: 553). Each of these divine personages has much-loved mythic accounts behind him, and has been internalized in the minds of the Hindus through extensive re-telling of epics, songs, and *purānas*. The pictures re-instill one's faith in these divine beings. Sri Ramakrishna was lost in spiritual bliss having viewed the picture of Vishnu, and intently gazed for a long time at the picture of Hanuman meditating upon the lotus-feet of Lord Ram while having the palm of the Lord placed on his head in the act of blessing (Sri M.: 553). The theme captures the intense spiritual longing of the devotee for his lord and the deep affection of the lord for his worshipper. Likewise, Krishna represents the impulses of both physical and spiritual loves and the events associated with Krishna's childhood in Vrindavan, as described in the *Bhāgavat Purāna*, have inspired Indian painters of miniatures, illuminated manuscripts, *patachitras* and murals for ages. Regarding the images of the wrathful forms of the Divine Mother in Bose's collection, Sri Ramakrishna pointed out the necessity of venerating the goddesses through proper worship (Sri M.: 553-554). He, after the visual tour, approved Bose's appreciation in Hindu art as expressed through his choice of having furnished his house chiefly with images of Hindu deities (Sri M.: 553). His comment thus establishes the importance of devotional art as the definite expression of one's cultural and religious identities and fervour (Sri M.: 553).

Appreciation for devotional art also influenced Sri Ramakrishna to turn to other faiths. It is well known that he was flooded with devotion for Jesus Christ after intently gazing upon the painting of the child Jesus in the loving, protective arms of His mother, the Virgin Mary, hung in the parlour in Jadulal Mallick's house (Tejasananda: 63-65). The depictions of the "Madonna" (Virgin Mary) along with the child Jesus have been a favourite theme for painters for centuries, and we come across the revered Mother and the Son depicted on altarpieces, panels, murals in churches, chapels and cathedrals. The "Madonna" painting seen by Sri Ramakrishna is unique. In the painting, the Virgin Mary is shown holding Jesus closely in her lap and her veil is protectively wrapped around her Child. She is looking affectionately towards the Son of God, who is facing the viewer of the painting. The painting is sober, with no details in the background, hence, without any distraction, the principal figures catch the full attention of the viewer.[1] Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual love for Mother Bhavatarini found expression through a similar reverence for Mother Mary (Sengupta: 132-133). Even in Indian art, we find affectionate depictions of Mother Yasoda with the child Krishna. Sri Ramakrishna pointed out that God can be reached also through parental love, or *vātsalya bhava* (Sengupta: 52). Depictions of child-rearing mother divinities are universally found in different faiths and cultures.

As Jakimowicz-Shah has noted, the visualization of a painted image or a sculpted statue of a deity installed in a shrine evokes impulses of an elevated sort of happiness and a spiritual appreciation; the senses attempt an internalization of the abstract qualities associated with the deity, that are expected to be manifested within the material existence of the divinity's image (Sengupta: 26). Sengupta provides an account of a female devotee who found Sri Ramakrishna in his room at Dakshineswar engaged in intimate conversation with the deities represented in the pictures displayed on the western wall (Sengupta: 752). Sri Ramakrishna imparted the wisdom to her that

those pictorial representations bore a consciousness of their own; he guided her to engage herself in conversations with the image of Govinda in her room, and through her constant belief in the livingness of the representation would one day be surely blessed with a vision of Him (Sengupta: 752-753). Sri Ramakrishna's love for the devotional images was so profound that he seemed to make no distinction between the deity and the pictorial depiction of him/her. His instruction to the devotees re-establishes in a moving, simpler way, the need for spiritual transformation through the cultivation and enjoyment of devotional art.

Sri Ramakrishna's love for pictures of deities was perhaps well known to his devotees and close acquaintances. Sengupta respectfully provides us a list of the pictorial representations of deities and sculpted idols given to Sri Ramakrishna, significant specimens are: an image of Kshemankari was given by Suresh Mittir which evoked in Sri Ramakrishna the impulses of affectionate concern for ensuring the Divine Mother's welfare; a picture having *Gourangakirtan* as its theme was given by Bhavanath; Keshab Chandra brought a picture of Jesus Christ (Sengupta: 753-754). The idols of Gautama Buddha and Lord Ganapati were given by eminent people like Rani Katyayani and Vishwanath Upadhyay respectively (Sengupta: 753-754).

From these accounts we can perceive that there was the spirit of the Universal Artist within Sri Ramakrishna, who loved devotional art irrespective of the faith or culture that inspired it. Images of Sri Ramakrishna can now be found in popular Bengali calendar art, sometimes depicted as engaged in caring for the Divine Mother, and/or communicating with Her; more often he is present along with the Holy Mother Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. We find the pictorial representations of the mystic hung on the walls in institutions, shrines, and private homes as well, indicating his holy presence and evoking our respect. The revered personage, whose love for art was manifested through his artistic pursuits as well as

his interpretations of religious pictures, has now found everlasting place in timeless devotional art itself.

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Note

[1] The description of the painting given here is based on an observation of the image displayed on the Vedanta Press and Catalog website.

শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ ও বিশিষ্টাদ্বৈতবাদ

অন্তরা ব্যানার্জী

ঠাকুর বলছেন ঃ 'ব্রহ্ম জীবজগৎ বিশিষ্ট। রামানুজের এরকম একটা মত আছে। বিশিষ্টাদ্বৈতবাদ বলে একে।'

এই কথার সূত্র ধরে খুঁজতে যাই বিশিষ্টাদ্বৈতবাদের স্বরূপ এবং তার সঙ্গে শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণের ভাবের কতটা মিল, কতটাই বা অমিল। খোঁজার শেষে দেখি ঠাকুরের হাত ধরেই ঘুরে এলাম দর্শন-সমুদ্র; সাংখ্য, বেদান্ত, অদ্বৈত, বিশিষ্টাদ্বৈত—এবং সেখানেই শেষ নয়, আরও অনেক কিছু। এ অভিজ্ঞতা সকলের সঙ্গে ভাগ করে নেবার আশাতেই এই প্রবন্ধের অবতারণা।

ষড়দর্শনের মধ্যে অন্যতম বেদান্ত মোক্ষশাস্ত্র রূপেই অধিক সমাদৃত। এই দর্শনের মূল বেদের অন্ত্যভাগ বা উপনিষদগুলি। ব্রহ্মবিদ্যাও বলেন কেউ কেউ বেদান্তদর্শনকে। যা হোক, সম্ভবত চতুর্থ শতাব্দীর মধ্যে ব্রহ্মসূত্রগুলি রচিত হয়েছিল উপনিষদকে ভিত্তি করে। সূত্রকার বাদরায়ণ বা ব্যাস। বৃত্তিকার বোধায়ন বা ভাষ্যকার উপবর্ষের নামটুকুই কেবল অবশিষ্ট। পুরো লেখা মেলে না। ৮ম শতাব্দীতে আচার্য শঙ্কর ভাষ্য রচনা করেন। পরে একাধিক ভাষ্যকার নিজের নিজের সম্প্রদায়ক্রমে (বৈষ্ণব, শৈব) বেদান্তসূত্রের ভাষ্য লিখেছেন—রামানুজ, নিম্বার্ক, মাধব, বল্লভ, শ্রীকণ্ঠ প্রমুখ। রামানুজ ছিলেন শ্রীসম্প্রদায়ের বৈষ্ণব। তাঁর মতটিই বিশিষ্টাদ্বৈতবাদ বলে খ্যাত। তাঁর ভাষ্যের নাম শ্রীভাষ্য।

শ্রীসম্প্রদায়মতে তিনটি মূল তত্ত্ব—চিৎ, অচিৎ ও ঈশ্বর। ঈশ্বর বিশেষ্য, অন্য দুটি তার বিশেষণ। ঈশ্বর নিত্যই চিৎ ও অচিৎ দ্বারা বিশিষ্ট। চিৎ আত্মা দেহাদিব্যতিরিক্ত, স্বপ্রকাশ, নিত্য, অণু, অতীন্দ্রিয়—সর্বদা একরূপ ও নির্বিকার। আত্মা জ্ঞানস্বরূপ। আত্মা আবার বদ্ধ, মুক্ত ও নিত্য ভেদে তিনপ্রকার। প্রকৃতির সংসর্গে আত্মাতে অবিদ্যা, কর্ম, বাসনা প্রভৃতি উৎপন্ন হয়। জ্ঞানপ্রকাশের অবস্থার অনুকূল বলে এই আত্মা স্বভাবতঃ আনন্দরূপ। তার দুঃখের হেতু দেহাত্মভ্রম।

অধ্যাপিকা, সংস্কৃত বিভাগ, বারাসাত সরকারী মহাবিদ্যালয়। এই নিবন্ধটি লেখিকা ২০ জানুয়ারি ২০১২ তারিখে সেমিনারে উপস্থাপনা করেন।

অচিৎ বা জড়তত্ত্ব বিকারপ্রাপ্ত হয়। এটিও তিনপ্রকার—শুদ্ধসত্ত্ব, মিশ্রসত্ত্ব ও কাল। প্রথমটি নিত্য, নির্মল এবং জ্ঞান ও আনন্দের জনক। মিশ্রসত্ত্ব বদ্ধজীবের জ্ঞান ও আনন্দের আবরক, বিপরীত জ্ঞানের হেতু। প্রকৃতি, অবিদ্যা, মায়া প্রভৃতি এর নামান্তর। এটি জ্ঞানবিরোধী এবং বিচিত্র সৃষ্টিসাধক। বৃদ্ধিলাভ করে এই সত্ত্ব ক্রমশ চতুর্বিংশতি তত্ত্বে পরিণতি পায়। আর সত্ত্বশূন্য ত্রিগুণরহিত অচিৎ হ'ল কাল। ঈশ্বরতত্ত্বই মূল তত্ত্ব এবং চিৎ ও অচিৎ-এর আশ্রয়। চিৎ ও অচিৎ তাঁর দেহ। তিনি অনন্ত জ্ঞান ও আনন্দস্বরূপ। লক্ষ্মী, ভূ ও লীলা তাঁর শক্তিত্রয়।

শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ এই বিশিষ্ট-অদ্বৈত'কে এক কথায় বলেন—'তিনিই অখণ্ড সচ্চিদানন্দ, তিনিই আবার জীব জগৎ হয়েছেন।' অনুপম ভাষায় উদাহরণ দিয়ে বুঝিয়ে দেন, 'তাঁকে যাঁরা পেয়েছে তাঁরা জানে যে তিনিই সব হয়েছেন। ঈশ্বর মায়া জীব জগৎ। ...যদি একটা বেলের খোলা শাঁস বীচি আলাদা করা যায়...খোলাটা যেন জগৎ; জীবগুলি যেন বীচি। ...বিচার করবার সময় শাঁসকেই সার, খোলা আর বীচিকে অসার বলে বোধ হয়। বিচার হয়ে গেলে, সমস্ত জড়িয়ে এক বলে বোধ হয়। ...যারই শাঁস, তারই বীচি, তারই খোলা।' অদ্বৈতীর কাছে 'ব্রহ্ম সত্য জগৎ মিথ্যা'। বিশিষ্টাদ্বৈতীর কাছে 'জীবজগৎশুদ্ধ তিনি'। ভক্তের চোখে জগৎ মিথ্যা নয়, তা ভগবানের ঐশ্বর্য। 'আকাশ, নক্ষত্র, চন্দ্র, সূর্য, পর্বত, সমুদ্র, জীবজন্তু এসব ঈশ্বর করেছেন, তাঁরই ঐশ্বর্য। তিনি অন্তরে হৃদয়মধ্যে আবার বাইরে।' উত্তম ভক্ত বলে—তিনি নিজে এই চতুর্বিংশতি তত্ত্ব—জীব-জগৎ হয়েছেন।

চিৎ ও অচিৎ ঈশ্বরের দেহ। তাঁর দেহ বদ্ধজীবের মত স্বরূপকে আচ্ছাদিত করে না, বরং প্রকাশ করে; সোনার পাত্র যেমন ভেতরকার সোনাকে প্রকাশিত করে, ভগবদ্‌বিগ্রহও তেমন ভগবানের স্বরূপ প্রকটিত করে। তাঁর স্বরূপ পঞ্চবিধ। অর্চাবতার—গৃহে বা মন্দিরে যিনি বিগ্রহরূপে পূজিত হন; বিভব বা প্রাদুর্ভাব—অবতার হয়ে যিনি আসেন; ব্যূহ—জীবের সৃষ্টির জন্য, রক্ষার জন্য, ভক্তের ভগবান হয়ে যিনি উপাস্য—এটি ভগবানের 'শান্তোদিত' রূপ; পর বা বাসুদেব—বৈষ্ণবমতে এটি ভগবানের পরম স্বরূপ। আর এই চারটির ঊর্ধ্বে আছে তাঁর অপূর্ব সেই স্বরূপ—অন্তর্যামীরূপে। জীবের উপাসনার জন্য, তাকে রক্ষা করার জন্য পরমাত্মা সখা হয়ে, বন্ধু হয়ে জীবের হৃদয়কমলে অধিষ্ঠান করেন অন্তর্যামীরূপে। বস্তুত 'সাধকানাং হিতার্থায় ব্রহ্মণো রূপকল্পনা'—সাধকের কল্যাণের জন্যই ব্রহ্মের রূপকল্পনা। যিনি অসীম, ভক্তের মনোবাসনা পূর্ণ করার জন্য তিনি সসীম হন। ঠাকুর বলেছেন, 'কি রকম জান? যেন সচ্চিদানন্দ সমুদ্র। কুলকিনারা নাই। ভক্তিহিমে সেই সমুদ্রের স্থানে স্থানে জল বরফ হয়ে যায়...অর্থাৎ ভক্তের কাছে তিনি সাক্ষাৎ হয়ে কখন কখন সাকার রূপ হয়ে দেখা দেন। আবার জ্ঞানসূর্য উঠলে সে বরফ গলে যায়।'

'তিনি যে নানারূপে ভক্তের কাছে আসেন তা-ই নয়, নররূপে জন্মগ্রহণও করেন তিনি।' ঠাকুর অন্যত্রও বলেছেন,—'ওঁ থেকেই ওঁ কালী, ওঁ শিব, ওঁ কৃষ্ণ। অর্থাৎ নিরাকার ব্রহ্মই শিব কালী প্রভৃতি সাকার মূর্তিতে ভক্তকে দর্শন দেন, আবার লোককল্যাণের জন্য কৃষ্ণ প্রভৃতি অবতাররূপেও তিনি পৃথিবীতে আবির্ভূত হন।'

বিশিষ্টাদ্বৈতমতে পূর্বোক্ত পাঁচটি রূপের পূর্বের পূর্বেরটির উপাসনায় মলনিবৃত্তি হলে উত্তরোত্তর উপাসনায় অধিকার জন্মায়। ক্রমশঃ ক্ষীণপাপ হলে ভগবান প্রসন্ন হয়ে অবিদ্যা নাশ করেন জীবের। ঈশ্বরের গুণগুলি তখন জীবে প্রকাশ পায়। ঈশ্বরের উপাসনা অর্থে ধ্যান। 'ধ্রুবানুস্মৃতিরূপ ধ্যান'। এই ধ্যানকেই রামানুজ মতে ভক্তি বলা হয়েছে। জ্ঞান এরই নামান্তর। শাস্ত্রাদি থেকে কর্মতত্ত্ব জেনে নিয়ে নিরন্তর স্বধর্মের অনুষ্ঠান ও তৎসহ ভক্তিযোগের অভ্যাস করতে হবে। ভক্তিই ঈশ্বরলাভের উপায়। জ্ঞান ও কর্ম চিত্তশুদ্ধির দ্বার মাত্র। কর্মদ্বারা অর্থ ও কামের প্রাপ্তি হয়। জ্ঞানযোগ দ্বারা কৈবল্যমুক্তি পর্যন্ত লাভ হতে পারে। জ্ঞানযুক্ত ভক্তিযোগে ঈশ্বরপ্রাপ্তি হয়। আর এই ধরনের ভক্তিযোগে যার সামর্থ্য নেই, তাঁর পক্ষে প্রপত্তি অর্থাৎ ঈশ্বরের শরণ নেওয়া—এটি শ্রেষ্ঠ 'ভাগবতধর্ম' বা 'প্রকৃত সন্ন্যাস'। প্রপত্তি সম্ভব না হলে উপায় 'আচার্যাভিমান'—আচার্য বা গুরুকে ভগবানের প্রতিনিধি জ্ঞানে তাঁর আশ্রয় গ্রহণ করতে হয়। 'মাতা যেমন রুগ্ন স্তন্যপায়ী শিশুর রোগদূরীকরণের উদ্দেশ্যে নিজেই রোগনিবর্তক ঔষধ সেবন করিয়া শিশুকে নিরাময় করেন, ভগবানও তেমনই দুর্বল, অসহায় ও নিজের শক্তিতে উত্থানাসমর্থ জীবের উদ্ধারকামনায় কোন সেবককে গুরুরূপে প্রেরণ করেন।'

ঠাকুর বলেছেন, জ্ঞান পুরুষমানুষ, বার বাড়ি পর্যন্ত যায়, ভক্তি মেয়েমানুষ, অন্দরমহল পর্যন্ত যেতে পারে। 'জ্ঞানপথে যেটা বিচার করে আনতে হয়—ত্যাগ, নিবৃত্তি বা সংযম—ভক্তিপথে সেটা আপনা-আপনি এসে যায়'। তাই 'ভক্তিপথেই তাঁকে সহজে পাওয়া যায়'।

সাংখ্যদর্শনের কৈবল্য বা মোক্ষপ্রাপ্তির সঙ্গে বিশিষ্টাদ্বৈতীর মোক্ষের মিল থাকলেও রামানুজ মতে ভক্তের পুরুষার্থ বা মোক্ষ 'ভগবদনুভব'। ভগবান আশ্রয়, জীব আশ্রিত—এই আশ্রিত ভাবই দাস্য, এরই পূর্ণ বিকাশ মোক্ষ। ঠাকুর বলেন, 'আমি তো কিছুতেই যাবে না। তবে থাক্ শালা 'দাস আমি' হয়ে।' মনে মনে সবসময় বলতে হয় 'আমি দাস, তুমি প্রভু', তুমি মা, আমি তোমার সন্তান—এইরকম অভ্যাস করতে করতেই ঈশ্বরলাভ হয়। এরই নাম ভক্তিযোগ। নির্বাণমুক্তিতে আমিত্ববোধ থাকে না। জ্ঞাতা ও জ্ঞেয়'র ভেদ লোপ পায়। কিন্তু ভক্ত মন মুক্তি চায় না, সে দাস হয়েই থাকতে চায়। প্রসঙ্গত হনুমানের কথা বলা যায়—

ভববন্ধচ্ছিদে তস্যৈ প্রার্থয়ামি ন মুক্তয়ে।
ভবান্ প্রভুরয়ং দাস ইতি যত্র বিলোপ্যতে।।

সাংখ্যদর্শনের চতুর্বিংশতি তত্ত্বকে মেনে ত্রিগুণাত্মিকা প্রকৃতিকে বহুভাবে চিনিয়ে দিয়ে সাংখ্যদর্শনকে ছেড়ে এগিয়ে গেছেন ঠাকুর। অদ্বৈতীর নির্গুণ নিরাকার ব্রহ্ম এবং বিশিষ্টাদ্বৈতীর সগুণ সপ্রপঞ্চ ব্রহ্মকে সমান সত্য বলে বুঝিয়ে দিয়েছেন তাঁর অতুলনীয় উদাহরণের মধ্যে দিয়ে। সেখানেও থেমে থাকেন নি। পুরুষ-প্রকৃতি, ব্রহ্ম-মায়া, শিব-কালী—নিত্য ও লীলার দ্বন্দ্ব চেনাতে চেনাতে পার করে নিয়ে গেছেন দর্শনের সব সীমানা। অবশেষে তাঁর পথ এসে মিশেছে তাঁরই অমৃতের সাগরে। ভক্তিরসের অমৃতসাগর। ভক্তি, কলিযুগের যুগধর্ম। ভক্তিতেও দেখাচ্ছেন ক্রম উত্তরণের পথ—বৈধীভক্তি, জ্ঞানমিশ্রা ভক্তি, রাগভক্তি বা শুদ্ধাভক্তি। সত্য থেকে উচ্চতর সত্যে আরোহণের যে মধুর পথ ঠাকুর শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ সহজ ভাষায় চোখে আঙুল দিয়ে দেখিয়ে দিয়েছেন, তাকে কোনও বাদ বা মতের গণ্ডীতে আটকে রাখা যায় না। গীতা সব উপনিষদের সার, আর সব দর্শনের সব মতবাদের সার শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ।

গ্রন্থঋণ ঃ

১) *শ্রীশ্রীরামকৃষ্ণকথামৃত*, শ্রীম-কথিত, ১৯৯৩ সংস্করণ

২) *ভারতীয় সাধনার ধারা*, ডঃ গোপিনাথ কবিরাজ

৩) *তব কথামৃতম্*, স্বামী লোকেশ্বরানন্দ

শ্রীশ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ ও তাঁর বৈষ্ণবসাধনা

পূর্বা সেনগুপ্ত

কথামুখ

ভগবান বিষ্ণুকে নিয়ে যাঁরা সাধনা করেন তাঁদেরই বলা হয় বৈষ্ণব। বিষ্ণু, নারায়ণ ও শ্রীকৃষ্ণ —এই তিন দেবতার অবস্থিতি আমরা এই সাধন প্রক্রিয়ার মধ্যে দেখতে পাই। ঊনবিংশ শতাব্দীর অবতার শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ স্বমুখে বারংবার বলেছেন, 'যে রাম, যে কৃষ্ণ—ইদানীং এ দেহে সেই শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ।' রাম ও কৃষ্ণের সমন্বিত রূপ শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ-জীবনে শ্রীরাম-সাধনা ও শ্রীকৃষ্ণ-সাধনা দুয়েরই উপস্থিতি লক্ষণীয়।

ভারতবর্ষের বৈষ্ণবভাবনা

ভারতবর্ষের প্রাচীনতম সাহিত্য ঋগ্‌বেদে আমরা বিষ্ণুর উপস্থিতি দেখতে পাই। এই বিষ্ণুকে কেন্দ্র করে উদ্ভব হয়েছে বৈষ্ণব ভাবনার। এই ভাবনার প্রধান সুর হল ভক্তির মাধ্যমে ঈশ্বরলাভ। বৈষ্ণব ভাবনার বিবর্তনের ধারায় আমরা তিনটি নামের উপস্থিতি দেখতে পাই—বৃষ্ণিবংশের বাসুদেব, যাদবপুত্র কৃষ্ণ ও নন্দরাজ পালিত গোপাল কৃষ্ণ। এই তিনটি ব্যক্তিত্ব যে এক নন, তার সম্বন্ধে নানা তথ্য ঐতিহাসিকগণ প্রদান করেছেন। প্রথম হলেন বৃষ্ণি বংশের বাসুদেব, যিনি 'ভাগবত' নামে একটি ভক্তি ধারার ধারক ছিলেন। খ্রীষ্টপূর্ব চতুর্থ শতাব্দীতে মেগাস্থিনিস এই ভাগবত ধারার কথা উল্লেখ করেছেন। বৌদ্ধশাস্ত্র 'নিদেশ'তে এই ধারার উল্লেখ আছে। খ্রীষ্টপূর্ব দ্বিতীয় শতকে বেশনগরে প্রাপ্ত গরুড়স্তম্ভে লেখা আছে, 'দেবদেবস্য বাসুদেবস্য'— তলায় উৎকীর্ণকারীর নাম দেওয়া হয়েছে, 'হেলিওডোরাস দি ভাগবত'। এর থেকে স্পষ্ট হয় ভাগবতধর্ম অনুসরণকারী রাজা হেলিওডোরাস এই অনুশাসন লিপিবদ্ধ করেন। এখানে উল্লেখ্য, যে পাণিনি সূত্রের মধ্যে আমরা অর্জুনকেও ধর্মপ্রবক্তা বা দেবতারূপে পাই। হয়ত অর্জুনের অনুসরণকারী কোন ধর্মমতের অস্তিত্ব ছিল, যা বাসুদেব ধর্মের মধ্যে অনুপ্রবিষ্ট হয়ে নিজের সত্তাকে

গবেষিকা, রামকৃষ্ণ মিশন ইন্সটিটিউট অফ কালচার, গোলপার্ক, কলকাতা। এই নিবন্ধটি লেখিকা ১৯ জানুয়ারি ২০১২ তারিখে সেমিনারে উপস্থাপনা করেন।

হারিয়ে ফেলে। অর্জুনের মতো 'সঙ্কর্ষণ' বা বলরামেরও পৃথক ভাবধারার অস্তিত্ব ছিল। বৌদ্ধ নিষেদ, পতঞ্জলির মহাভাষ্য, গোসুন্দি ও নানাঘাটের অনুশাসনে এবং খ্রীষ্টপূর্ব দ্বিতীয় শতাব্দীতে খোদিত মথুরা ভাস্কর্যের মধ্যে সঙ্কর্ষণের সন্ন্যাস সম্প্রদায়ের উল্লেখ পাওয়া যায়। কিন্তু এই স্বাতন্ত্র্য ক্রমে অপসৃত হয়। কারণ, আমরা মহাভারতের মধ্যে দেখি, সঙ্কর্ষণ হলেন বাসুদেবের ভ্রাতা। কোন কারণে সঙ্কর্ষণের ধারা বাসুদেবের ধারার সঙ্গে মিশে গিয়েছিল। সুতরাং, আমরা ভক্তিধারার মধ্যে বাসুদেবের নাম পেলাম, যিনি বৃষ্ণিবংশের সন্তান ছিলেন; যাঁর অনুসরণকারীরা 'ভাগবত' নামে পরিচিত হতেন। এর পরবর্তী বা সমসাময়িক ধারাটি হল যাদবপুত্র শ্রীকৃষ্ণ-এর।

যাদবপুত্র শ্রীকৃষ্ণ বা দেবকীনন্দন শ্রীকৃষ্ণকে একটি ট্রাইবাল বা আদিবাসী গোষ্ঠির অধিপতিরূপে চিহ্নিত করা হয়েছে। যে দেবকীপুত্র কৃষ্ণকে 'ছান্দোগ্য উপনিষদে' (৩.১৭.১) ঘোরা অঙ্গিরসের শিষ্য বলা হয়েছে, সেই কৃষ্ণই 'ভগবদ্‌গীতা' প্রচারের মাধ্যমে স্বতন্ত্র মতের সূচনা করেন। তৎকালীন রাজনৈতিক কারণে যাদব ও বৃষ্ণিগণ পরস্পর পরস্পরের কাছে চলে আসে এবং পরবর্তীকালে বাসুদেবের পৃথক অস্তিত্ব কৃষ্ণের সঙ্গে মিশে যায়। তৃতীয় যে ধারাটি বৈষ্ণবধারায় অঙ্গীভূত হয়েছে সেটি হল 'গোপাল কৃষ্ণের' ধারা। 'গোপাল কৃষ্ণ' ঐতিহাসিকদের মতে, প্রাচীন 'আভীর' নামক উপজাতির রাখাল শ্রেণীর প্রতিনিধি। যে গোষ্ঠী ছিল ইন্দ্রের উপাসক। গিরি গোবর্ধন ধারণের মধ্যে, বৈদিক দেবতা ইন্দ্রের প্রাধান্য থেকে নিজ গোষ্ঠীকে সরিয়ে আনবার একটি প্রবণতা আমরা দেখতে পাই। এছাড়াও, গোপীদের সঙ্গে নিষ্কাম প্রেমের ভাব একটি বিশেষ আধ্যাত্মিক ধারার প্রচার করে। এই চরিত্রের সঙ্গে শিশু খৃষ্টের জীবন কাহিনীর আশ্চর্য রকম সাদৃশ্য দেখতে পান পণ্ডিতেরা। 'গোপাল কৃষ্ণে'র সঙ্গে 'যাদব কৃষ্ণে'র সম্মিলনকে ঐতিহাসিকগণ 'পরিপূর্ণ কৃষ্ণতত্ত্ব' (Greater Krishnaism) রূপে আখ্যায়িত করেছেন। 'বৃষ্ণি বাসুদেব', 'যাদব কৃষ্ণ', ও 'আভীর' উপজাতির 'গোপাল কৃষ্ণ'—এই তিনকে কেন্দ্র করে গড়ে উঠেছে বৈষ্ণব ভাবনার সামগ্রিকরূপ।

এখন প্রশ্ন তিনধারার সম্মিলিত রূপ নিয়ে ভারতবর্ষে বৈষ্ণবভাবনা প্রসারের সময় কাল কী? ঐতিহাসিকদের মতে, খ্রীষ্টপূর্ব সপ্তম শতাব্দী থেকে চতুর্থ শতাব্দী ভারতবর্ষের ধর্মভাবনার অস্থির এক অধ্যায়। এই সময় বৈদিক ধারার অবক্ষয় এবং জৈন বা বৌদ্ধের মত অবৈদিক ধারার সূচনা হয়। অনুমান করা হয় এই সময় সূচনা হয়েছিল 'বৈষ্ণব ধারা'র। এই নবতম ধারায় 'কৃষ্ণ'ই হলেন প্রধান। এখানে মনে রাখা প্রয়োজন কৃষ্ণ কিন্তু বৈদিক দেবতা নন। বৈদিক দেবতা বিষ্ণু। 'ঐতরেয় ব্রাহ্মণে' বিষ্ণুকে জগৎ প্রপঞ্চের নিয়ামক রূপে কল্পনা করা হয়েছে। বৈষ্ণব ভাবনায় এই বিষ্ণুই কৃষ্ণে পরিণত হলেন,

কারণ পুরাণে কৃষ্ণকে দেখানো হল বিষ্ণুর অবতার রূপে। সুতরাং, বৈদিক বিষ্ণু পৌরাণিক কৃষ্ণে রূপান্তরিত হলেন।

মনে রাখা দরকার, আমাদের অবতারবাদ অনুযায়ী, ত্রেতা যুগে রাম ও দ্বাপরে কৃষ্ণ —এঁরা দুজনেই বিষ্ণুর অবতার। সেই দিক দিয়ে রাম ও কৃষ্ণ স্বরূপত এক। তাই বৈষ্ণবগণ কখনও রামের উপাসক, কখনও বা কৃষ্ণের উপাসক। আবার কৃষ্ণকে নিয়ে, দুটি ভিন্ন ধারার দেখা পাওয়া যায়। একটি হল 'রুক্মিণী' পুত্র কৃষ্ণের—যে ধারার পরিপুষ্টি সাধন করেছেন মহারাষ্ট্রের সাধককুল। আর দ্বিতীয় ধারাটি হল 'রাধাকৃষ্ণের'—যে ধারার পরিপুষ্টি সাধন করেছিলেন জয়দেব, নিম্বার্ক ও চৈতন্য। বাংলার শ্রীচৈতন্যদেব (১৪৮৬-১৫৩৩) কেবলমাত্র বাংলাদেশে বৈষ্ণবভাবনাকে প্রতিষ্ঠিত করতে অগ্রণী ভূমিকা গ্রহণ করেননি, তিনি বৈষ্ণবদের একত্র আরাধনা বা কীর্তনের সূত্রপাত করেন। বৈষ্ণবভাবের ক্ষেত্রে 'কীর্তন' কেবল উল্লেখযোগ্য স্থান গ্রহণ করে না, এ এক নবতম সংযোজনও বটে। এছাড়া, বৈষ্ণবভাবনার 'ভক্তি'কে একমাত্র অবলম্বন করে যে যে সাধকেরা খ্যাত হয়েছেন তাঁদের মধ্যে, ত্রয়োদশ শতাব্দীতে মহারাষ্ট্রে জ্ঞানেশ্বর, পঞ্চদশ শতাব্দীতে গুজরাটে নরসিংমেহতা, পঞ্চদশ শতাব্দীতে কর্ণাটকে শ্রীপদরাজ, পুরন্দরদাস, পঞ্চদশ-ষোড়শ শতাব্দীতে আসামে শংকরদেব, ষোড়শ শতাব্দীতে রাজস্থানে মীরাবাঈ, সপ্তদশ শতাব্দীতে উত্তরপ্রদেশের তুলসীদাস, ও সপ্তদশ শতাব্দীতে মহারাষ্ট্রের তুকারাম গুরুত্বপূর্ণ।

বৈষ্ণব ভাবনার মূল উপাদান নিহিত ছিল মহাভারতে। পরবর্তীকালে 'ভগবদ্‌গীতা' ও 'হরিবংশে' এর পুষ্টি দেখতে পাই। এছাড়া অষ্টাদশ পুরাণের মধ্যে মূলত ছয়টি পুরাণ —'বিষ্ণুপুরাণ', 'নারদ পুরাণ', 'ভাগবত পুরাণ' 'গরুড়পুরাণ', 'পদ্মপুরাণ' এবং 'বরাহপুরাণ' বৈষ্ণবভাবের পরিপুষ্টি সাধন করেছে। এদের মধ্যে ভাগবত পুরাণ গুরুত্বপূর্ণ স্থান গ্রহণ করেছে। বৈষ্ণব ভাবনার ক্ষেত্রে আরেকটি উল্লেখযোগ্য গ্রন্থ হল- 'পঞ্চরাত্র'। সাধারণ বৈষ্ণবমতের থেকে ভিন্ন হয়ে যে 'তান্ত্রিক বৈষ্ণবমতের' জন্ম হয় সেই মতের গ্রন্থ হল 'পঞ্চরাত্র'। আমরা শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ জীবনে যে বৈষ্ণবধারার দেখা পাই তা বাংলার শ্রীচৈতন্য পরবর্তী বৈষ্ণব ধারা। স্মরণীয়, তিনি যে পরিবারে জন্মগ্রহণ করলেন সেখানে 'রঘুবীর শিলা' পূজিত হত।

শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ জীবনে বৈষ্ণবভাব

শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ জীবনের দিকে যদি আমরা তাকাই তবে দেখতে পাব তাঁর জীবনের প্রথম দিকে প্রত্যক্ষভাবে বৈষ্ণবভাবের উপস্থিতি উল্লেখযোগ্য। তাঁর গৃহদেবতা ছিলেন 'রঘুবীর'। তাঁর পিতা, পিতৃব্য ও বংশের অন্যান্য পুরুষের নামের সঙ্গে 'রাম' কথাটি সংযুক্ত থাকায় চট্টোপাধ্যায় পরিবারের 'রামে'র প্রতি ভক্তিই চিহ্নিত হয়।

কামারপুকুর ছেড়ে ঠাকুর যখন দক্ষিণেশ্বরে উপস্থিত হলেন, তখন তিনি মা কালীর পূজারী। তাঁর বিরল সাধনা তাঁকে 'জগদম্বার বালক' রূপে লোকপ্রসিদ্ধি এনে দিয়েছিল। অর্থাৎ তাঁর জীবনের প্রথম দিকে বৈষ্ণবভাবের প্রত্যক্ষ দেবতা 'বিষ্ণু' 'রাম' রূপে উপস্থিত, কিন্তু বৈষ্ণবধর্মের অপরধারার আরাধ্যদেবতা 'বাসুদেব' বা 'কৃষ্ণ' কেউই উপস্থিত নন বলে মনে হয়। কিন্তু শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণের জন্মবৃত্তান্তের মধ্যে বৈষ্ণব ধারা এসেছে। পিতা ক্ষুদিরাম চট্টোপাধ্যায় গিয়েছেন গয়াধামে 'বিষ্ণুপাদপদ্মে' পূর্বপুরুষের উদ্দেশ্যে জল নিবেদন করতে। রাত্রে তাঁর অদ্ভুত দর্শন হল। তিনি দেখলেন, এক অসামান্য পুরুষ তাঁকে উদ্দেশ্য করে বললেন, 'ক্ষুদিরাম, তোমার ভক্তিতে পরম প্রসন্ন হইয়াছি, পুত্ররূপে তোমার গৃহে অবতীর্ণ হইয়া আমি তোমার সেবা গ্রহণ করিব!'[১] কিছুদিনের মধ্যে স্বপ্নকে সত্যি করে দেবী চন্দ্রমণির কোলে জন্মগ্রহণ করলেন গদাধর। অর্থাৎ বৈষ্ণবভাবের প্রাণপুরুষ অবতাররূপে অবতীর্ণ! তাই শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণের জীবনে বৈষ্ণবভাবের আলোচনায় আমাদের তাঁর জন্মবৃত্তান্তের কথা অবশ্যই মনে রাখতে হবে।

১২৬২ সালের ১৮ই জ্যৈষ্ঠ, ইংরেজী ১৮৫৫ খ্রীস্টাব্দের ৩১ শে মে দক্ষিণেশ্বরের মন্দির প্রতিষ্ঠিত হয়। ঠাকুর ১২৬২ সনেই মন্দিরের পূজকরূপে ব্রতী হন। এই ১২৬২ থেকে ১২৭৩ সন পর্যন্ত তাঁর সাধন জীবনকে লীলাপ্রসঙ্গকার তিনভাগে ভাগ করেছেন। ১২৬২ থেকে ১২৬৫ প্রথম বিভাগ, ১২৬৬ থেকে ১২৬৯ দ্বিতীয় ভাগ। তৃতীয় ধাপ হল ১২৭০ থেকে ১২৭৩ পর্যন্ত চার বছর। লীলাপ্রসঙ্গকার লিখছেন, সাধনার তৃতীয় ধাপে "তিনি জটাধারী নামক রামাইত সাধুর নিকট হইতে রামমন্ত্রে উপদিষ্ট হন ও শ্রীশ্রীরামলালবিগ্রহ লাভ করেন। বৈষ্ণবতন্ত্রোক্ত মধুরভাবে সিদ্ধিলাভের জন্য ছয়মাস কাল স্ত্রীবেশ ধারণ করিয়া থাকেন, আচার্য শ্রীতোতাপুরীর নিকট হইতে সন্ন্যাসগ্রহণপূর্বক সমাধির নির্বিকল্পভূমিতে আরোহণ করেন এবং পরিশেষে শ্রীযুক্ত গোবিন্দের নিকট হইতে ইসলামী ধর্মে উপদেশ গ্রহণ করিয়াছিলেন।" কিন্তু তারপরেই বলছেন, "উক্ত দ্বাদশ বৎসরের ভিতরেই তিনি বৈষ্ণবতন্ত্রোক্ত সখ্যভাবের এবং 'কর্তাভজা', 'নবরসিক' প্রভৃতি বৈষ্ণব মতের অবান্তর সম্প্রদায়সকলের সাধনমার্গের সহিতও পরিচিত হইয়াছিলেন। বৈষ্ণবধর্মের সকল সম্প্রদায়ের মতের সহিতই তিনি যে বিশেষভাবে পরিচিত ছিলেন, একথা বৈষ্ণবচরণ গোস্বামী প্রমুখ ঐ সকল পথের সাধকবর্গের তাঁহার নিকট আধ্যাত্মিক সহায়তালাভের জন্য আগমনে স্পষ্ট বুঝা যায়।"[২]

সাধনার দ্বিতীয় ধাপে, ভৈরবী ব্রাহ্মণীর নির্দেশে ঠাকুর বৈষ্ণবধর্মের পঞ্চভাবের সাধনায় নিজের সাধন জীবনকে পরিপুষ্ট করেন।

ভৈরবী ব্রাহ্মণীর দক্ষিণেশ্বরে আগমনের আগে ঠাকুরের জীবনে দাস্যভাবের সাধনার

উপস্থিতি দেখা যায় এবং এই সময় তাঁর একটি উল্লেখযোগ্য দর্শনলাভ হয়। লীলাপ্রসঙ্গকার বলছেন, "সাধনকালে প্রথম চারি বৎসরে ঠাকুর বৈষ্ণবতন্ত্রোক্ত শান্ত, দাস্য এবং কখনো শ্রীকৃষ্ণসখা সুদামাদি ব্রজকবালকের ন্যায় সখ্যভাবাবলম্বনে সাধনে স্বয়ং প্রবর্তিত হইয়া সিদ্ধিলাভ করিয়াছিলেন।"[৩]

বৈষ্ণবভাবনায় ভক্তিরসের প্রধান পাঁচটি ধারা সম্বন্ধে 'চৈতন্যচরিতামৃতে' বলা হয়েছে,

"ভক্তিভেদে রতিভেদ পঞ্চ পরকার
শান্তরতি, দাস্যরতি, সখ্যরতি আর।।
বাৎসল্যরতি, মধুররতি পঞ্চবিভেদ।
রতিভেদে কৃষ্ণভক্তি রস পঞ্চভেদ।।
শান্ত, দাস্য, সখ্য, বাৎসল্য, মধুররস নাম।
কৃষ্ণভক্তি রসমধ্যে এ পঞ্চ প্রধান।।"[৪]

আমরা জানি, রামচন্দ্রের প্রতি হনুমানের যে দাস্যভক্তি সেই দাস্যভাব তাঁর শরীর ও মনকে আশ্রয় করে এক বিচিত্ররূপ লাভ করে। শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ জীবনে যখন যেভাবে সাধনা করেছেন, সেই ভাবে এতটাই ডুবে গিয়েছেন যে, ভাবটি থেকে তাঁকে পৃথক করা একেবারে দুঃসাধ্য বলে মনে হয়েছে। দাস্যভক্তির পরাকাষ্ঠা রূপে আমরা রামভক্ত হনুমানের কথাই জানি। এই হনুমানের ভাবে ভাবিত হয়ে ঠাকুর কতটা তদ্‌গতচিত্ত হয়েছিলেন, তা তাঁর কথা থেকেই শোনা যাক। ঠাকুর বলতেন, 'ঐ সময়ে আহার বিহারাদি সকল হনুমানের ন্যায় করিতে হইত—ইচ্ছা করিয়া যে করিতাম তাহা নহে, আপনা আপনি হইয়া পড়িত! পরিবার কাপড়খানাকে লেজের মতো করিয়া কোমড়ে জড়াইয়া বাঁধিতাম, উল্লম্ফনে চলিতাম, ফলমূলাদি ভিন্ন অপর কিছুই খাইতাম না—তাহাও আবার খোসা ফেলিয়া খাইতে প্রবৃত্তি হইত না, বৃক্ষের উপরই অনেক সময় অতিবাহিত করিতাম এবং নিরন্তর 'রঘুবীর রঘুবীর' বলিয়া গম্ভীরস্বরে চিৎকার করিতাম। চক্ষুদ্বয় তখন সর্বদা চঞ্চল ভাব ধারণ করিয়াছিল এবং আশ্চর্যের বিষয়, মেরুদণ্ডের শেষভাগটা ঐ সময়ে প্রায় এক ইঞ্চি বাড়িয়া গিয়াছিল।' শেষোক্ত কথাটি শুনিয়া আমরা জিজ্ঞাসা করিয়াছিলাম, 'মহাশয়, আপনার শরীরের ঐ অংশ কি এখনো ঐরূপ আছে?' উত্তরে তিনি বলিয়াছিলেন, 'না, মনের উপর হইতে ঐ ভাবে প্রভুত্ব চলিয়া যাইবার কালে উহা ধীরে ধীরে পূর্বের ন্যায় স্বাভাবিক আকার ধারণ করিয়াছে।"[৫]

এই সময় ঠাকুরের এক অদ্ভুত দর্শন হল। একদিন আনমনে 'পঞ্চবটী'তে বসে আছেন তিনি, হঠাৎ দেখলেন এক অপূর্ব দেবী মূর্তি। মূর্তিটি তাঁর দিকে অগ্রসর হতে লাগল। তিনি ভাবতে লাগলেন কে এই দেবী! হঠাৎ তাঁর ভাবনার নিরসন করে এক হনুমান

কোথা থেকে উপস্থিত হয়ে সেই দেবীর সম্মুখে হুপ্ করে বসে দেবীর পায়ে লুটিয়ে পড়ল। সঙ্গে ঠাকুরের মনে উদয় হল, 'সীতা' 'জনক রাজা নন্দিনী সীতা', 'রামময় জীবিতা সীতা'।

শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণের সাধনজীবনের প্রথম চার বৎসরের শেষ দিকে কামারপুকুরে অবস্থান কালে এক অপূর্ব দর্শনলাভ হয়। ঠাকুরের বৈষ্ণবভাবসাধনার সঙ্গে এই দর্শনর সম্বন্ধ সুনিবিড়। একদিন ঠাকুর পালকিতে করে কামারপুকুর থেকে সিহরের দিকে যাচ্ছিলেন। লীলাপ্রসঙ্গকার সেই দিনের স্মৃতিচারণে বলছেন, "...যাইতে ঠাকুর দেখিলেন, তাঁহার দেহমধ্য হইতে দুইটি কিশোরবয়স্ক সুন্দর বালক সহস্য বহির্গত হইয়া বনপুষ্পাদির অন্বেষণে কখনো প্রান্তরমধ্যে বহুদূরে, আবার কখনো বা শিবিকার সন্নিকটে আগমনপূর্বক হাস্য, পরিহাস, কথোপকথনাদি নানা চেষ্টা করিতে করিতে অগ্রসর হইতে লাগিল। অনেকক্ষণ পর্যন্ত ঐরূপ আনন্দে বিহার করিয়া তাহারা পুনরায় তাঁহার দেহমধ্যে প্রবিষ্ট হইল। ঐ দর্শনের প্রায় দেড় বৎসর পরে ব্রাহ্মণী দক্ষিণেশ্বরে আসিয়া উপস্থিত হন। কথাপ্রসঙ্গে এক দিবস ঠাকুরের নিকটে ঐ দর্শনের বিবরণ শুনিয়া তিনি বলিয়াছিলেন, 'বাবা, তুমি ঠিক দেখিয়াছ, এবার নিত্যানন্দের খোলে চৈতন্যের আবির্ভাব— শ্রীনিত্যানন্দ ও শ্রীচৈতন্য এবার একসঙ্গে একাধারে আসিয়া তোমার ভিতরে রহিয়াছেন। সেইজন্যই তোমার ঐরূপ দর্শন হইয়াছিল।' হৃদয় বলিত, ঐকথা বলিয়া ব্রাহ্মণী চৈতন্য-ভাগবত হইতে নিম্নের শ্লোক দুইটি আবৃত্তি করিয়াছিলেন—

"অদ্বৈতের গলা ধরি কহেন বারবার
পুনঃ যে করিব লীলা মোর চমৎকার।
কীর্তনে আনন্দরূপ হইবে আমার।।
অদ্যাবধি গৌরলীলা করেন গৌররায়।
কোন কোন ভাগ্যবানে দেখিবারে পায়।"[৬]

সাধক জীবনের শেষদিকে বৈষ্ণবভাবকে আশ্রয় করে শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ সাধন লীলার এই দুটি প্রকাশ আমরা দেখে থাকি। ঠাকুরের জীবনে বৈষ্ণবভাবের প্রকাশ আরও পরিপুষ্ট হয়েছিল ভৈরবী ব্রাহ্মণের আগমনের পরবর্তী পর্যায়ে। সাধককালের প্রথম চার বছরের মধ্যে আমরা ঠাকুরের মধ্যে বৈষ্ণবভাবের 'শান্ত', 'দাস্য', ও 'সখ্য'ভাবের সাধন প্রক্রিয়ার দেখা পাই। কিন্তু ভৈরবী ব্রাহ্মণী আসার পর তাঁর মধ্যে বাৎসল্য ও মধুরভাবের পরিপুষ্টি দেখা যায়। সাধনের প্রথম ভাগে কখনও কখনও তাঁকে জগদম্বার সখীরূপে দেবীকে বীজন করতে দেখা যায়। দুর্গাপূজার সময় মথুরবাবুর গৃহে তিনি এইভাবে নিজেকে দেবীর 'সখী' জ্ঞানে বীজন করেছিলেন। ঠাকুরের দেহে নারীভাব অপূর্বভাবে প্রকাশিত

হত। কিন্তু সেইভাব মধুরভাবের সাধনের সময় আরও অপূর্ব রূপ লাভ করে।

ভৈরবী ব্রাহ্মণী যখন দক্ষিণেশ্বরে উপস্থিত হয়েছেন, তখন ঠাকুর অসহ্য গাত্রদাহে কষ্ট পাচ্ছেন। সে দাহ এতটাই তীব্র যে মনে হত, শরীরের মধ্যে আগুনপূর্ণ মালসা রক্ষিত আছে। ঠাকুর গাত্রদাহের প্রাবল্যে গঙ্গায় ডুবে থাকতেন, মাথার উপর চাপানো থাকত ভিজে গামছা। মথুরবাবু এই গাত্রদাহ কমানোর জন্য ঠাকুরকে বহু চিকিৎসা করিয়েছিলেন। কিন্তু কোনভাবেই সেই জ্বালা কমানো সম্ভব হয় নি। ভৈরবী ব্রাহ্মণী এই গাত্রদাহকে অবতারের লক্ষণ বলেই চিহ্নিত করলেন। তিনি শাস্ত্র প্রমাণের সাহায্যে দেখালেন ঈশ্বর বিরহে বিধুর শ্রীমতী রাধারানী ও শ্রীকৃষ্ণচৈতন্যের জীবনে এই একই উপসর্গের দেখা পাওয়া যায়। এটি কেবল ভাব নয়, এ হল মহাভাব! শুধু তাই নয়, এই গাত্রদাহে তাঁর রোমকূপ দিয়ে বিন্দু বিন্দু শোণিতও নির্গত হতে দেখা যেত। ব্রাহ্মণী অসুখের ওষুধও দিলেন মোক্ষম। ডাক্তার, কবিরাজের ওষুধে যখন কিছুই হচ্ছে না, তখন ব্রাহ্মণী বললেন, সমস্ত দেহে চন্দন লেপন ও গন্ধমাল্যে শ্রীঅঙ্গকে বিভূষিত করলেই এই রোগের উপশম হবে। কেবল ওষুধ নির্ধারণ নয়, কিছুদিনের মধ্যে সেই ওষুধ তিনি ঠাকুরের অঙ্গে প্রয়োগ করলেন এবং তাঁকে সুস্থ করে তুললেন। ব্রাহ্মণীর এই সাফল্য তাঁর বক্তব্যকে প্রতিষ্ঠিত করল, কিন্তু সন্দিগ্ধমনা মানুষ কালীর পূজারীকে অবতার বলে স্বীকার করে নেবেই বা কেন? লোকে যাই বলুক, ব্রাহ্মণী কিন্তু তাঁর সিদ্ধান্তে অটল রইলেন। তিনি বলে বেড়াতে লাগলেন, শ্রীমতী রাধারানী ও শ্রীচৈতন্যদেবের অঙ্গে যে ঈশ্বরবিরহের লক্ষণ ফুটে ওঠে, শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণের অঙ্গে সেই একই লক্ষণের প্রকাশ! অর্থাৎ, লোকশিক্ষা দিতে স্বয়ং ভগবান এবারে অবতীর্ণ হয়েছেন। ব্রাহ্মণী কেবল নিজে বললেন না, নিজ মতকে প্রতিষ্ঠা করার জন্য নাটমন্দিরে পণ্ডিতদের সভা ডাকালেন। সভায় উপস্থিত হলেন তৎকালের বৈষ্ণব সমাজের মান্যতাপ্রাপ্ত সাধক বৈষ্ণবচরণ।

সভায় অবতারের অবতারত্ব প্রতিষ্ঠিত হয়েছিল। সে সত্যিই এক চমকপ্রদ ঘটনা। কিন্তু তার থেকেও চমকপ্রদ হল ঠাকুরের মধুরভাবের সাধন। আমরা আগেই বলেছি, তন্ত্রসাধনের শেষের দিকে তিনি মধুরভাবে সাধন করেছিলেন। মধুরভাব, অর্থাৎ ঈশ্বরকে স্বামীজ্ঞানে, প্রিয়তম জ্ঞানে আরাধনা করা। এই সময়ে ঠাকুর নিজেকে নারী-জ্ঞান করেছিলেন। এই ভাবে সাধনকালে তিনি কেবল হাবে-ভাবে নয়, নারীর মত পরিচ্ছদ ও গহনাও পরিধান করতেন। এই সময় মথুরবাবু তাঁর জন্য বেনারসি শাড়ি, ঘাঘড়া, ওড়না, কাঁচুলি আর এক সেট সোনার অলঙ্কারও তৈরী করে দিয়েছিলেন। এই সময় তাঁর নারীভাব এতদূর নিপুণভাবে অঙ্গের মধ্যে প্রতিফলিত হত যে অতি নিকটজনও তাঁকে সহসা চিনে উঠতে পারতেন না। ঠাকুরের ভাগ্নে হৃদয়, যিনি তাঁর সারা জীবনের

নিত্যসঙ্গী ছিলেন, সেই হৃদয়রামও কখনও কখনও মামাকে চিনতে পারতেন না। একবার জানবাজারে রাণী রাসমণির অন্তঃপুরে হৃদয়কে ধরে নিয়ে গেলেন মথুরবাবু। অন্তঃপুরমধ্যে নারীরা অবস্থান করছেন। মথুরবাবু তাঁকে জিজ্ঞাসা করলেন, 'বল দেখি, এঁদের মধ্যে তোমার মামা কোন্‌টি?' নিত্য সহচর হৃদয়রাম মথুরবাবুর প্রশ্নের উত্তর দিতে পারলেন না, কারণ নারীমধ্যে নারীভাবে অবস্থিতা শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণকে তিনি চিনতে পারেন নি। ঠাকুরের এই তন্ময়তা উল্লেখ করে হৃদয় বলেছেন, "দক্ষিণেশ্বরে অবস্থানকালে মামা তখন প্রতিদিন প্রত্যূষে সাজি হস্তে লইয়া বাগানে পুষ্পচয়ন করিতেন—আমরা ঐ সময়ে বিশেষভাবে লক্ষ্য করিয়াছি, চলিবার সময় রমণীর ন্যায় তাঁহার বামপদ প্রতিবার স্বতঃ অগ্রসর হইতেছে। ব্রাহ্মণী বলিতেন, তাঁহার ঐরূপে পুষ্পচয়ন করিবার কালে তাঁহাকে (ঠাকুরকে) দেখিয়া আমার সময়ে সময়ে সাক্ষাৎ শ্রীমতী রাধারানী বলিয়া ভ্রম হইয়াছে।"[৭] এই সময় ঠাকুর ব্রজগোপীভাবে শ্রীশ্রীরাধাগোবিন্দজীকে নিজ হাতে মালা গেঁথে পরিয়ে দিতেন! সবথেকে উল্লেখযোগ্য হল দক্ষিণেশ্বরের যে মাতৃমূর্তি আরাধনা করে তিনি জগতের কাছে 'জগদম্বার বালক' রূপে প্রতিভাত হয়েছিলেন, মধুরভাবসাধনকালে তিনি সেই মাতৃমূর্তির কাছে শ্রীকৃষ্ণকে স্বামী রূপে লাভ করার জন্য কাতর প্রার্থনা করতেন। এই কাতর প্রার্থনা এক এক সময় উন্মত্তের ন্যায় তীব্র ও ব্যাকুল হয়ে উঠত! কৃষ্ণবিরহে তাঁর সমস্ত শরীরে আবার জ্বালাভাব ফিরে এসেছিল! কেবল তাই নয়, নারী শরীরের সমস্ত লক্ষণ তাঁর দেহমধ্যে পরিস্ফুট হতে দেখা যেত। হৃদয়রাম তাঁর স্মৃতিকথায় জানিয়েছেন যে, বস্ত্র দুষ্ট হয়ে যাওয়ার ভয়ে ঠাকুর মাসের তিনদিন কৌপীন ব্যবহার করতেন। দাস্যভাবে যেমন হনুমানের কথা চিন্তা করতে করতে মেরুদণ্ডের শেষভাগে ইঞ্চিখানেক বর্ধিত হয়েছিল, ঠিক তেমনই মধুরভাবে দেখা গেল নারীর শারীরিক বৈশিষ্ট্যাবলীর আশ্চর্য উপস্থিতি! নারীর মতো বিরহে তিনি স্তব্ধ হতেন! দেহের ইন্দ্রিয়গুলি বিরহের তাপে অচল অবশ হয়ে এক সময় নিশ্চেষ্টরূপ লাভ করে মৃতদেহের মতো স্থির নিশ্চল হয়ে যেত! রাধার কৃষ্ণের প্রতি এই অতীন্দ্রিয় প্রেম ভক্তিশাস্ত্রে নানাভাবে বর্ণিত হয়েছে। সেই অমানুষী প্রেম জগতকে আবার দেখাবার জন্য 'অন্তঃকৃষ্ণ বহিঃরাধা' রূপে শ্রীচৈতন্য আবির্ভূত হয়েছিলেন। সেই একই প্রেমের বহিঃপ্রকাশ ঘটেছিল শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণের সাধন জীবনের মধ্য দিয়ে। তাঁর মধুরভাবের সাধনের এই হল ঐতিহাসিক তাৎপর্য! শ্রীকৃষ্ণের অতীন্দ্রিয় প্রেমলাভের জন্য প্রয়োজন রাধালীলার কৃপা, তাই ঠাকুর মধুরভাবের সাধনায় রাধিকার দর্শন লাভ করলেন। সেই রাধিকামূর্তিও অন্যান্য সাধনার মতো তাঁরই অঙ্গে মিলিয়ে গেল। এই দর্শনের পর ঠাকুর নিজেকে কিছুদিন রাধারানী বলে উপলব্ধি করেছিলেন। কেবল তাই নয়, রাধারানীর মহাভাবজাত সমস্ত লক্ষণ তাঁর মধ্যে পরিস্ফুট হয়ে উঠেছিল। এই ভাবের লক্ষণ প্রকাশ পেলে ভৈরবী ব্রাহ্মণী ও

বৈষ্ণবচরণ বিস্মিত হয়ে ঠাকুরের অবতারত্বে পুনরায় নিশ্চিত হয়েছিলেন। ঠাকুর শ্রীমতীর দর্শনলাভের কথা ব্যক্ত করে বলেছিলেন, "শ্রীকৃষ্ণপ্রেমে সর্বস্বহারা সেই নিরুপম পবিত্রোজ্জ্বল মূর্তির মহিমা ও মাধুর্য বর্ণনা করা অসম্ভব। শ্রীমতীর অঙ্গকান্তি নাগকেশরপুষ্পের কেশরসকলের ন্যায় গৌরবর্ণ দেখিয়াছিলাম।"

"উনিশ প্রকারের ভাব একাধারে প্রকাশিত হইলে তাহাকে মহাভাব বলে, একথা ভক্তিশাস্ত্রে আছে। সাধন করিয়া এক একটা ভাবে সিদ্ধ হইতেই লোকের জীবন কাটিয়া যায়! (নিজের শরীর দেখাইয়া) এখানে একাধারে একত্র ঐপ্রকার উনিশটি ভাবের পূর্ণ প্রকাশ।"[৮]

শ্রীমতী রাধারাণীর বিগ্রহ দর্শন করার কিছুদিনের মধ্যেই তিনি ভগবান শ্রীকৃষ্ণের দর্শনলাভ করেছিলেন। লীলাপ্রসঙ্গকার জানিয়েছেন, পরবর্তীকালে একদিন একটি ঘাসফুল ছিঁড়ে এনে উৎফুল্লভাবে ঠাকুর তাঁদের জানিয়েছিলেন, মধুরভাব সাধনকালে যে কৃষ্ণমূর্তির দেখা তিনি পেতেন, সেই মূর্তির গায়ের রঙ এই ঘাসফুলের মতো ছিল। ঐ সাধনের সময় তিনি কৃষ্ণচিন্তায় এতটা তন্ময় হয়ে যেতেন যে সময়ে সময়ে তিনি নিজেকে শ্রীকৃষ্ণ বলে মনে করতেন আবার কখনও কখনও আব্রহ্মস্তম্ব সকল বস্তুতে শ্রীকৃষ্ণের উপস্থিতি উপলব্ধি করতেন। এইভাবে প্রতিটি ভাবে চরম প্রকাশ যখন অদ্বৈত অনুভূতিতে গিয়ে মিশে যেত, তখন ঠাকুর সেই ভাবটি সার্থক করে আবার নতুনভাবে, নতুন সাধনায় তন্ময় হতেন। জগতের ইতিহাসে সব ভাবসাধনার ধারাকে সত্য রূপে প্রমাণিত করার জন্যই যেন তাঁর আধ্যাত্মিক অভিযাত্রা! নিজের সাধনা দিয়েই তিনি জগতের সমগ্র সাধনার ভাবকে প্রতিষ্ঠা করে গিয়েছেন।

ঠাকুরের জীবনে বৈষ্ণবভাব বা ব্রজগোপীদের ভাব, মধুরভাব সাধনের আগে থেকেই বর্তমান ছিল। কৈশোরে তিনি কখনও ব্রজগোপীদের প্রেমের কথা স্মরণ করে সেই ভাব অবলম্বনে নিজের পুরুষ শরীরকে অন্তরায় বলে মনে করতেন এবং তাঁর কল্পনা ছিল পরজন্মে তিনি ব্রাহ্মণের ঘরে পরমাসুন্দরী দীর্ঘকেশী বালবিধবা হয়ে জন্মগ্রহণ করবেন। তাঁর মোটা ভাত কাপড়ের সংস্থান থাকবে, কুঁড়ে ঘরের চারপাশে কিছু জমি, তার মধ্যে দু-পাঁচ রকমের শাক বোনা যাবে। এর সঙ্গে থাকবে এক বৃদ্ধা অভিভাবিকা আর একটা গাভী! যে গাভীকে তিনি নিজ হাতে দোহন করতে পারবেন। এর সঙ্গে থাকবে একটি সুতো কাটার চরকা। দিনের বেলা সেই চরকা কেটে সুতো তৈরী করতে করতে কৃষ্ণের গান গাইবেন আবার গাভী থেকে যে দুধ পাওয়া যাবে, তা থেকে মিষ্টি তৈরী করে কৃষ্ণকে নিবেদন করবেন! কৃষ্ণও গোপবালক বেশে উপস্থিত হয়ে সেই মিষ্টান্ন আনন্দের সঙ্গে গ্রহণ করবেন। কিশোর বয়সের এই ভাবনার পরিণতি ঘটেছিল

মধুরভাব সাধনার মধ্য দিয়ে।[৮] এই সাধনার সময় ঠাকুরের আরেকটি উপলব্ধি বিশেষ মনোযোগের দাবী রাখে। মধুরভাব সাধনকালে ঠাকুর একদিন বসে আছেন বিষ্ণুমন্দিরের সম্মুখের দালানে সেখানে ভাগবত পাঠ হচ্ছে। সেই পাঠ শুনতে শুনতে তন্ময় হয়ে গেলেন ঠাকুর! সেই অবস্থায় দেখলেন, একটি জ্যোতির দড়ি কৃষ্ণ বিগ্রহের অঙ্গ হতে নির্গত হয়ে প্রথমে ভাগবতপাঠক ও পরে ভাগবতকে স্পর্শ করে শেষ তিনবস্তুতে সংযুক্ত হয়ে রইল। ঠাকুর ঐ দৃশ্য দর্শন করে বললেন, "ভাগবত (শাস্ত্র), ভক্ত ও ভগবান—তিনে এক, একে তিন!"[৯]

শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ সাধনকৃত বৈষ্ণবভাবনার আরেকটি দিক আমাদের ভুললে চলবে না! যে দিকটিকে অবলম্বন করে বাংলার বৈষ্ণব আন্দোলন পরিপুষ্ট হয়েছে ষোড়শ শতাব্দী থেকে। শ্রীচৈতন্যদেবের আগমনের পর বৈষ্ণবধর্ম ভাবনা আবার নতুন রূপ পরিগ্রহ করেছিল। ঠাকুর সেই ধারার সঙ্গেও নিজেকে মিশিয়ে দিয়েছিলেন। শিহড়ের পথে তাঁর দর্শনের কথা আমরা উল্লেখ করেছি। এস্থলে আমরা দক্ষিণেশ্বরে ঠাকুরের বিশেষ দর্শনের কথা উল্লেখ করব। কেশব সেনের সঙ্গে পরিচয়ের কিছু পরে ঠাকুরের মনে নদীয়ার অবতার শ্রীচৈতন্যদেবের কীর্তন দর্শন করার সাধ হয়েছিল। একদিন তিনি নিজের ঘরের বারান্দায় দাঁড়িয়ে দেখলেন পঞ্চবটীর দিক থেকে সংকীর্তনের দল দক্ষিণেশ্বরের মন্দিরের উদ্যানের প্রধান ফটকের দিকে এগিয়ে আসছে এবং বৃক্ষের অন্তরালে গিয়ে তা লীন হয়ে যাচ্ছে। সেই সংকীর্তন দলে তিনি শ্রীগৌরাঙ্গ, শ্রীনিত্যানন্দ, শ্রীঅদ্বৈতপ্রভুকে এবং আরও অনেক ভক্তকে দর্শন করেন। পরবর্তীকালে তাঁর কাছে যে ভক্তকুল উপস্থিত হয়েছিলেন তাদের মধ্যে কাউকে কাউকে তিনি সেই চৈতন্যের দলে দর্শন করেছিলেন বলে চিহ্নিত করেছেন।

শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ যখন নিজ জীবনে বৈষ্ণবভাবের সাধন করেছিলেন তখন শ্রীচৈতন্য জীবন ও বৈষ্ণবভাব সম্বন্ধে সাধারণের মনের ধারণা কি ছিল সে সম্বন্ধে লীলাপ্রসঙ্গে সুন্দরভাবে উল্লেখ করা হয়েছে। সেই সঙ্গে বর্ণিত হয়েছে কি করে ঠাকুর শ্রীগৌরাঙ্গের জন্মস্থান ও তার অবতারত্বকে নতুনভাবে প্রতিষ্ঠিত করেছিলেন। লীলাপ্রসঙ্গকার বলছেন, "শ্রীগৌরাঙ্গের অবতারত্ব সম্বন্ধে আমাদের ভিতর অনেকেই তখন সন্দিহান ছিলেন, এমনকি বৈষ্ণব অর্থে ছোটলোক এই কথাই বুঝিতেন এবং সন্দেহ নিরসনের নিমিত্ত ঠাকুরকে অনেক সময় ঐ বিষয়ে জিজ্ঞাসাও করিয়াছিলেন। ঠাকুর তদত্তুরে একদিন আমাদের বলিয়াছিলেন, 'আমারও তখন তখন ঐ রকম মনে হতো রে, ভাবতুম পুরাণ ভাগবত কোথাও কোন নামগন্ধ নেই—চৈতন্য আবার অবতার! ন্যাড়া-নেড়ীরা টেনে-বুনে একটা বানিয়েছে আর কি!-কিছুতেই ও কথা বিশ্বাস হতো না। মথুরের সঙ্গে

নবদ্বীপে গেলুম। ভাবলুম, যদি অবতারই হয় তো সেখানে কিছু না কিছু প্রকাশ থাকবে, দেখলে বুঝতে পারব। একটু প্রকাশ (দেবভাবের) দেখবার জন্য এখানে ওখানে বড় গোঁসাইয়ের বাড়ি, ছোট গোঁসাইয়ের বাড়ি ঘুরে ঘুরে ঠাকুর দেখে বেড়ালুম-কোথাও কিছু দেখতে পেলুম না!—সব জায়গাতেই এক এক কাঠের মুরদ হাত তুলে খাড়া হয়ে রয়েছে দেখলুম! দেখে প্রাণটা খারাপ হয়ে গেল, ভাবলুম, কেনই বা এখানে এলুম। তারপর ফিরে আসব বলে নৌকায় উঠছি, এমন সময়ে দেখতে পেলুম অদ্ভুত দর্শন দুটি সুন্দর ছেলে—এমন রূপ কখনো দেখিনি, তপ্ত কাঞ্চনের মতো রং, কিশোর বয়স, মাথায় একটা করে জ্যোতির মণ্ডল, হাত তুলে আমার দিকে চেয়ে হাসতে হাসতে আকাশপথ দিয়ে ছুটে আসছে! অমনি 'ঐ এলোরে এলোরে' বলে চেঁচিয়ে উঠলুম। ঐ কথাগুলি বলতে না বলতে তারা নিকটে এসে (নিজের শরীর দেখাইয়া) এর ভিতর ঢুকে গেল, আর বাহ্যজ্ঞান হারিয়ে পড়ে গেলুম! জলেই পড়তুম, হৃদে নিকটে ছিল, ধরে ফেললে! এইরকম করে ঢের সব দেখিয়ে বুঝিয়ে দিলে—বাস্তবিকই অবতার, ঐশ্বরিক শক্তি বিকাশ!"[১০]

উনবিংশ শতাব্দীতে, বাঙলায় শ্রীচৈতন্যের প্রচারিত বৈষ্ণবধর্মের অনুবর্তীদের মধ্যে উল্লেখযোগ্য ছিলেন কালনার ভগবানদাস বাবাজী। তাঁর ত্যাগ তপস্যায় উজ্জ্বল জীবন তাঁকে তৎকালের বৈষ্ণব সমাজের বৈষ্ণব শিরোমণি করে তুলেছিল। এই সময় কলকাতার কলুটোলায় একটি হরিসভায় হৃদয়কে সঙ্গে নিয়ে উপস্থিত হয়েছিলেন শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ। কলুটোলার সভ্যগণ হরিকথা আলোচনার আগে তাঁদের ইষ্টদেব শ্রীচৈতন্যের জন্য একটি আসন সজ্জিত করে রাখতেন। তাঁরা মনে করতেন এই আসনে বসে শ্রীচৈতন্যদেব তাঁদের হরিকথা শ্রবণ করেন। যেদিন ঠাকুরকে নিয়ে হৃদয় সেখানে উপস্থিত হয়েছিলেন, সেদিন এইরকমই একটি চৈতন্যাসন রক্ষিত ছিল। সভায় হরিপ্রসঙ্গ শুরু হল, ঠাকুর শুনতে শুনতে বিভোর হয়ে ভাবের ঘোরে শ্রীচৈতন্যের আসনটি গ্রহণ করলেন এবং ভাবে তাঁর অঙ্গপ্রত্যঙ্গ চৈতন্যের মত আকার ধারণ করল। সঙ্গে সঙ্গে উপস্থিত পরিবেশ পরিবর্তিত হয়ে গেল। হরিসংকীর্তনে মাতোয়ারা বৈষ্ণবগণ বহুক্ষণ কীর্তন আনন্দ ভোগ করলেন, ঠাকুরও তাঁদের আনন্দ দান করে ফিরে আসলেন। ইতিমধ্যে শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণের চৈতন্যাসন গ্রহণের কথা কালনার ভগবানদাস বাবাজীর কানে পৌঁছল! বৈষ্ণব সমাজের শিরোমণি তিনি! অপূর্ব প্রেম ভক্তি ও হরিগুণগানে সমৃদ্ধ বাবাজীর জীবন তাঁকে বৈষ্ণবসমাজে মান্যতা প্রদান করেছিল। কোন বৈষ্ণবের আচরণ বিধি অবৈষ্ণবজনোচিত হলে তার বিচার করতেন কালনার ভগবান দাস! কলুটোলায় এক সাধক চৈতন্যের আসন গ্রহণ করেছেন শুনে ভগবানদাস অত্যন্ত ক্রুদ্ধ হলেন এবং ঠাকুরের উদ্দেশ্যে

কটুবচন প্রয়োগও করলেন তিনি! এর কিছুদিনের মধ্যেই ঠাকুর হৃদয়কে নিয়ে চললেন কালনার ভগবানদাসবাবাজীর আশ্রমে। ঠাকুর সেই আশ্রমে প্রবেশমাত্রই তপস্বী ভগবানদাস অনুভব করলেন, কোন মহাপুরুষ আশ্রমে প্রবেশ করেছেন। কারণ তাঁর গাত্র সৌরভে চতুর্দিক আমোদিত। এই সময় জড়সড়, বস্ত্রে আবৃত ঠাকুর হৃদয়কে সম্মুখে নিয়ে ভগবানদাসের সম্মুখে উপস্থিত হলেন। বাবাজী তখন বৈষ্ণবদের বিচারে মগ্ন, একজনকে তিনি তিরস্কার করার সময় তার বৈষ্ণবের চিহ্ন মালা কেড়ে নেওয়ার হুমকি দিলেন। একদিকে বিচার চলছে অপরদিকে ভগবানদাস মালা জপ করে চলেছেন! হৃদয় বাবাজীকে প্রশ্ন করলেন, 'আপনি এখনও মালা রেখেছেন কেন?' ভগবানদাস উত্তর দিলেন, 'নিজের প্রয়োজন না থাকলেও লোকশিক্ষা দেওয়ার জন্য মালা রেখেছি!' এতক্ষণ ঠাকুর সভার একপাশে দীনভাবে বসে ছিলেন, বাবাজীর মুখে এ কথা শুনে ভাবে উঠে দাঁড়ালেন এবং তিরস্কার করে বলতে লাগলেন, "...এখনও এত অহঙ্কার রাখ? তুমি লোকশিক্ষা দিবে? তুমি তাড়াইবে? তুমি ত্যাগ ও গ্রহণ করিবে? তুমি লোকশিক্ষা দিবার কে? যাঁহার জগৎ তিনি না শিখাইলে তুমি শিখাইবে-?"[১১] এইকথাগুলি বলতে বলতে ঠাকুরের মুখমণ্ডল অপূর্ব জ্যোতিতে উদ্ভাসিত হয়ে উঠল, বস্ত্র প্রায় খসে যায়! তাঁর সেই সমাধিস্থ অবস্থা দেখে ভগবানদাস স্তম্ভিত হলেন। ত্যাগ, তপস্যায় অন্তরকে সমৃদ্ধ করেছিলেন ভগবানদাস, তাই ঠাকুরের তিরস্কার তাঁর চোখ খুলে দিল। তিনি বিনীত ও নম্রভাবে ঠাকুরের উপদেশ গ্রহণ করলেন। এরপর শুরু হল ভগবৎ প্রসঙ্গ! ভগবানদাস দেখলেন, শ্রীচৈতন্যের মধ্যে যে যে ভাবগুলির কথা তিনি শুনে এসেছেন, যা লাভ করার সাধনায় তিনি রত, সেই ভাবমণ্ডলী সশরীরে দণ্ডায়মান। শ্রীচৈতন্যের আসন গ্রহণের জন্য তিনি এই ব্যক্তিকেই কটু কথা বলেছেন মনে করে তাঁর অনুশোচনার অবধি রইল না। তিনি ঠাকুরের কাছে ক্ষমা প্রার্থনা করলেন।

তৎকালের বাতাবরণে বৈষ্ণবভাবনায় সমৃদ্ধ যে সমস্ত স্থানগুলি ছিল, তাঁর সঙ্গেও পরিচিত ছিলেন শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ। সেই সব স্থানে গিয়ে তিনি স্থানগুলিকে তীর্থে পরিণত করেছেন। এর মধ্যে ফুলুই শ্যামবাজার ও কলকাতার নিকটবর্তী পানিহাটী'র চিঁড়ের মহোৎসবের কথা উল্লেখযোগ্য। খড়দার শ্যামসুন্দরের কথা বলতে গিয়ে তিনি প্রায়শই বলতেন, এই বিগ্রহ নড়েচড়ে কথা বলে। পঞ্চবটীতে ভাবস্থ অবস্থায় চৈতন্যসহ সংকীর্তনের দল দর্শনের কিছুদিন পরেই ঠাকুর কামারপুকুরের কাছেই ফুলুই ও শ্যামবাজারে উপস্থিত হয়েছিলেন। সেখানে কিছু বৈষ্ণববাস করেন এবংতারা কীর্তন আনন্দে মেতে থাকেন শুনে ঠাকুর সেখানে গিয়েছিলেন। এই উপলক্ষে সেই গ্রামের ঈশানচন্দ্র মল্লিক ঠাকুরকে নিজের বাড়িতে আহবান করেছিলেন। শ্যামবাজারের পাশেই বেলটে গ্রাম,

সেখানে বাস করতেন নটবর গোস্বামী। তিনিও ঠাকুরকে স্বগৃহে নিমন্ত্রণ করেন। এই অঞ্চলে ঠাকুরের আগমন এবং তাঁর অপূর্ব কীর্তনের কথা এমনভাবে লোকমুখে প্রচারিত হয়েছিল যে শ্যামবাজার ও ফুলুইয়ের পাশাপাশি রামজীবনপুর, কৃষ্ণগঞ্জ প্রভৃতি গ্রামগুলি থেকে দলে দলে মানুষ কীর্তন দেখতে উপস্থিত হলেন। দিবারাত্র ধরে চলল সেই অপূর্ব কীর্তন, চারিদিক কীর্তনের আনন্দে মাতোয়ারা। রটনা হল, এমন একজন মানুষ এসেছেন যিনি দিনে সাতবার বাঁচেন, আবার সাতবার মারা যান। সর্বত্র লোক, এমনকি গাছের ডালে পর্যন্ত। ঠাকুরের আর নাওয়া-খাওয়া হয় না। হৃদয় শেষ পর্যন্ত ঠাকুরকে লুকিয়ে নিয়ে উপস্থিত হলেন শিহড়ে। শ্যামবাজার ফুলুই অঞ্চলের ঈশান চৌধুরী, নটবর গোস্বামী, ঈশান মল্লিক, শ্রীমান মল্লিক প্রভৃতি বৈষ্ণবগণ ঠাকুরের কীর্তন আনন্দের সঙ্গে যোগ দিয়েছিলেন। কৃষ্ণগঞ্জের প্রসিদ্ধ খোলবাদক শ্রীযুক্ত রাইচরণ দাসের সঙ্গেও ঠাকুরের পরিচয় হয়েছিল।

শ্যামবাজার ফুলুইয়ের মতোই ঠাকুর বৈষ্ণব সমাবেশে কীর্তনানন্দে মাতোয়ারা হয়েছিলেন পানিহাটীতে। সেইকালের বৈষ্ণব পণ্ডিত বৈষ্ণবচরণের সঙ্গে তাঁর পানিহাটীতেই পরিচয় হয়েছিল। বৈষ্ণব শিরোমণি রঘুনাথদাস গোস্বামীকে শ্রীচৈতন্যদেব সংসারে ফিরে যেতে আদেশ করেছিলেন। সেই আদেশ অনুসারে, রঘুনাথ দাস পানিহাটী অঞ্চলে বসবাস করতে থাকেন। পরে শ্রী নিত্যানন্দ মহাপ্রভু যখন খড়দহ গ্রামকে কেন্দ্র করে বাঙলায় বৈষ্ণব ধর্মকে আবার উজ্জীবিত করতে এলেন, তখন এই পানিহাটীতে উপস্থিত হলে রঘুনাথের সঙ্গে তাঁর সাক্ষাৎ হয়। নিত্যানন্দ প্রভু তাঁকে চিড়া, দই, দুধ, শর্করা আর কলা দিয়ে বৈষ্ণবদের ভোজন করাতে আদেশ প্রদান করেন। নিত্যানন্দ প্রভুর আদেশ অনুসারে রঘুনাথ দাস শত শত বৈষ্ণবকে চিঁড়ে, দই, দুধ, শর্করা দিয়ে ভোজন করিয়েছিলেন। এই উৎসব চিঁড়ের মহোৎসব নামে খ্যাত। জ্যৈষ্ঠ মাসের শুক্লা ত্রয়োদশী তিথিতে সেই উৎসব আজও পালিত হয়। ঠাকুর এই পানিহাটীর মহোৎসবে অনেকবারই যোগদান করেছিলেন। এর মধ্যে উল্লেখযোগ্য হল ১৮৮৫ খ্রীস্টাব্দের পানিহাটীর উৎসব। এই উৎসবে ঠাকুর যুবক ভক্তসহ কয়েকজনকে নিয়ে পানিহাটীতে উপস্থিত হয়েছিলেন। তখন তাঁর গলরোগের সূত্রপাত হয়ে গিয়েছে, কীর্তন-আনন্দে মাতলে রোগের প্রকোপ বৃদ্ধি পাবে একথা জেনে সকলে ঠাকুরকে কীর্তনে অংশগ্রহণ না করবার অনুরোধ করেছিলেন। কিন্তু পানিহাটী পৌঁছে দেখা গেল বৈষ্ণবগণ ইতস্তত কীর্তন করছেন বটে, কিন্তু তার মধ্যে যথার্থ ভগবানলাভের উদ্যম বা প্রাণ নেই! ঠাকুর মণি সেনের গৃহে রাধাকান্তজীকে দর্শন করতে উপস্থিত হলেন। এই সময় এক বৈষ্ণবের ভাবস্থ অবস্থার মেকি অঙ্গ-ভঙ্গি দেখে ঠাকুর বীর বিক্রমে কীর্তন মঞ্চে প্রবেশ করলেন। সঙ্গে সঙ্গে

পরিবেশ ভিন্নরূপ ধারণ করল। শ্রীচৈতন্যদেব কীর্তন সহযোগে যে হুঙ্কার ও ভাবময়তা দেখাতেন, তা ঠাকুরের চেহারার মধ্যে পরিস্ফুট হয়ে উঠল! সমগ্র মেলাপ্রাঙ্গণ মেতে উঠল ঠাকুরকে নিয়ে। মণি সেনের বাড়ি থেকে শ্রীচৈতন্যের পার্ষদ রাঘব পণ্ডিতের বাড়ির উদ্দেশ্যে রওনা হলেন, সঙ্গে কীর্তনাভিলাষী বহু মানুষ। ঠাকুরকে পেয়ে তাঁরা আনন্দে গান ধরেছেন, 'সুরধুনীর তীরে হরি বলে কে রে, বুঝি প্রেমদাতা নিতাই এসেছে।' গানটি গাইবার সময় তাঁরা বারংবার 'এই আমাদের প্রেমদাতা'[১২] বলে ঠাকুরকে দেখিয়ে দিতে থাকলেন। মণি সেনের বাড়িতে পৌঁছাতে ঠাকুরের প্রায় তিনঘন্টা সময় লাগল। সেখানে মন্দির দর্শন করে যখন নৌকায় গিয়ে উঠেছেন, তখন কোন্নগরবাসী নবাই চৈতন্য ঠাকুরের পদপ্রান্তে আছড়ে পড়লেন এবং প্রাণের আবেগে ক্রন্দন করতে লাগলেন। ঠাকুর তাঁর ব্যাকুলতা দেখে সেই ভাবাবেশের মধ্যেই তাঁকে স্পর্শ করেছিলেন। সঙ্গে সঙ্গে সেই ব্যাকুল ক্রন্দন অসীম উল্লাসে পরিণত হল। এইভাবে বৈষ্ণবতীর্থে বৈষ্ণব সঙ্গে ঠাকুর পুনরায় তীর্থকে আবার জাগরিত করেছিলেন সেই শুভদিনে।

শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ জীবনে বৈষ্ণবসাধনার দিকে দৃষ্টিপাত করলে আমাদের মনে হয়, ঠাকুর সেই ভাবের সঙ্গে একাত্ম ও তন্ময় হয়ে গিয়েছিলেন। শাক্তের মনে হত, তিনি বড় শাক্ত সাধক আবার বৈষ্ণব ভাবত তিনি আচারনিষ্ঠ বৈষ্ণব। কারণ তিনি ছিলেন ধর্মের সারবস্তু, সূর্যস্বরূপ, তাঁর মধ্যে সাতরঙই প্রস্ফুটিত হত। স্বাভাবিকভাবেই সব রঙের, সব ভিন্নতার ধারকই ছিলেন তিনি। তাই বিজয়কৃষ্ণ গোস্বামী থেকে কর্তাভজা সম্প্রদায় সকলেই ঠাকুরকে পরম বৈষ্ণবরূপেই জেনেছিলেন। শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণভাবনার 'শিব জ্ঞানে জীব সেবার' ভাবটির সূত্র লুকিয়ে ছিল বৈষ্ণবভাবনার মধ্যেই। যুগাবতার 'রামকৃষ্ণে'র মধ্যে 'রাম' ও 'কৃষ্ণে'র ভাবটি যেমন পরিস্ফুট হয়েছিল, তার সঙ্গে 'বিষ্ণু'র অবতারত্বও হয়েছিল ব্যক্ত। আবার তিনি বৈষ্ণবরূপে 'রাম', 'কৃষ্ণ', ও 'বিষ্ণু'র সার্থক উপাসকও বটে। এইভাবে ভারতবর্ষের তাবৎ বৈষ্ণবভাবনার ধারা তাঁর মধ্যে মূর্ত হয়ে উঠেছিল। তৎকালের ভারতে বৈষ্ণবভাবনাকে উজ্জীবিত করেছিলেন শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ। 'কথামৃতে'র মধ্যে আমরা পাই, 'রাধা'র ঐতিহাসিক সত্যতা নিয়ে নরেন্দ্রনাথ প্রশ্ন তুললে শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ তাঁকে বলেছিলেন, 'রাধার টানটুকু নে না!' যিনি রাধা চরিত্রটি কল্পনা করেছেন তিনি নিজের কল্পনাকে সেইরূপটি দানের সময় সেই রাধার স্তরে নিশ্চয়ই উন্নীত করতে পেরেছিলেন। এই ছিল শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণের দৃষ্টিভঙ্গি। কেবল ভাবগত দিক দিয়ে নয়, আচারগত দিক দিয়েও যেন বৈষ্ণবভাবটি সঠিক ধারাকে অনুসরণ করতে পারে তার প্রচেষ্টাও ঠাকুরের জীবনে আমরা কম দেখি না। ভগবানদাস বাবাজীকে তিরস্কার, বা পানীহাটিতে কীর্তনানন্দে মাতোয়ারা হয়ে ওঠা—এ সবই ছিল এই প্রচেষ্টারই অঙ্গ। শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ-

পূর্ববর্তী যুগে বৈষ্ণবভাবনা ভারতবর্ষে যে রূপে ছিল, তাকে শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ নূতনরূপে উজ্জীবিত করেছিলেন।

তথ্যসূত্র

১) *শ্রীশ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ লীলাপ্রসঙ্গ*, স্বামী সারদানন্দ, প্রথমভাগ, পূর্বকথা ও বাল্যজীবন দ্বাদশ সংস্করণ (উদ্বোধন কার্যালয়) ১৯৬০, ২৬তম পুনর্মুদ্রণ ফাল্গুন ১৪১৭, তৃতীয় অধ্যায়, পৃষ্ঠা-২৯

২) *শ্রীশ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ লীলাপ্রসঙ্গ*, স্বামী সারদানন্দ, উদ্বোধন কার্যালয়, দ্বাদশ সংস্করণ ১৯৬০, ২৬তম পুনর্মুদ্রণ ফেব্রুয়ারী ২০১১ প্রথমভাগ, সাধকভাব, অষ্টম অধ্যায়, পৃষ্ঠা-৭৯

৩) তদেব, দ্বাদশ অধ্যায়, পৃষ্ঠা-১২৬

৪) *শ্রীশ্রীচৈতন্যচরিতামৃত*, শ্রীশ্রীকৃষ্ণদাস কবিরাজ গোস্বামী, গীতাপ্রেস, গোরক্ষপুর, ষষ্ঠ পুনর্মুদ্রণ, মধ্যলীলা, ১৯শ পরিচ্ছেদ, পৃষ্ঠা-৩৭৪

৫) তদেব, অষ্টম অধ্যায়, পৃষ্ঠা-৮২

৬) তদেব, পৃষ্ঠা-৯২-৯৩

৭) তদেব, চতুর্দশ অধ্যায়, পৃষ্ঠা-১৫৩

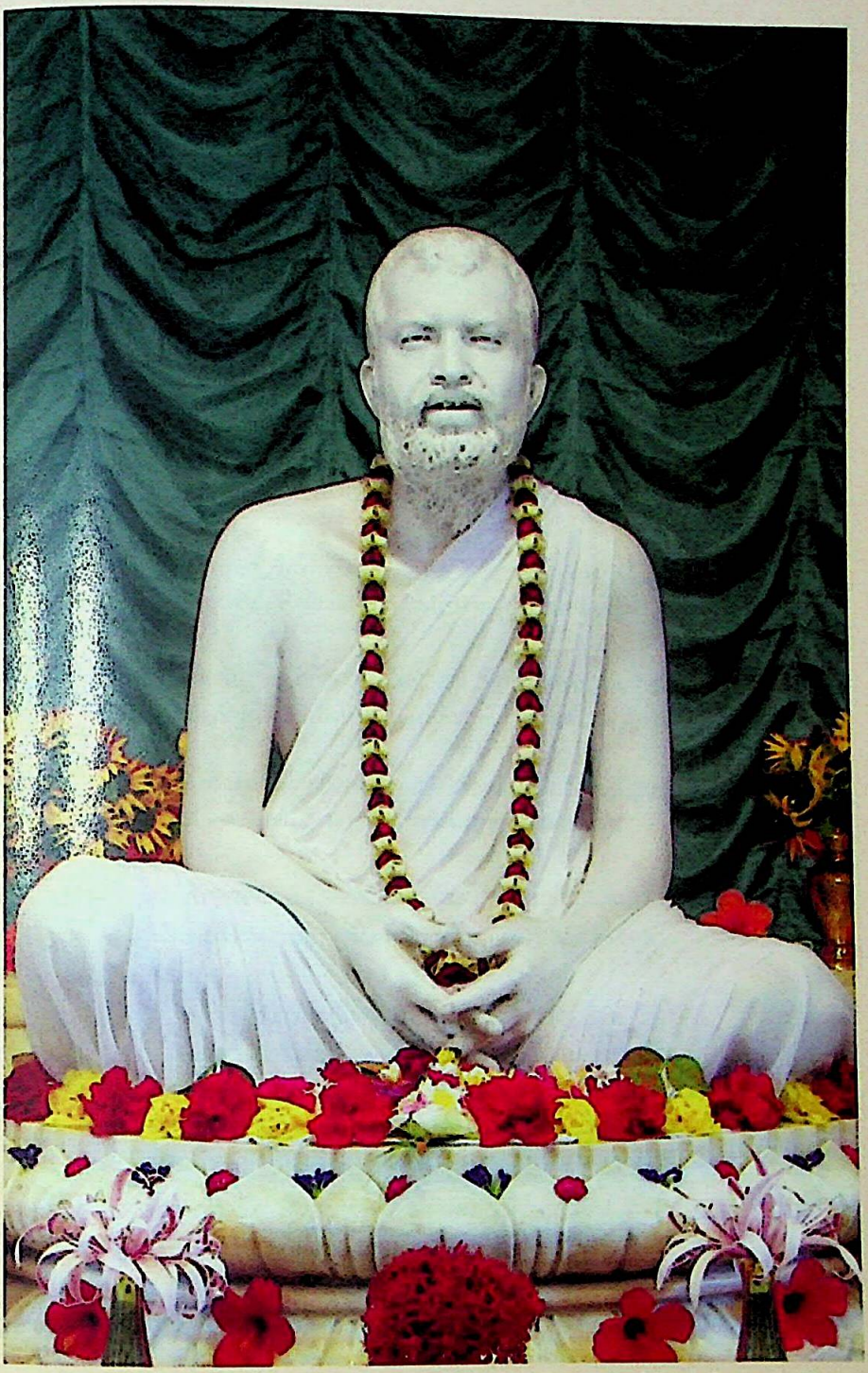
৮) তদেব, পৃষ্ঠা-১৫৫

৯) তদেব, পৃষ্ঠা-১৫৮

১০) তদেব, দ্বিতীয়ভাগ, একাদশ সংস্করণ ৮ মার্চ ১৯৬৩, ৩৫তম পুনর্মুদ্রণ সেপ্টেম্বর ২০১১, গুরুভাব উত্তরার্ধ, তৃতীয় অধ্যায়, পৃষ্ঠা-৭৪

১১) তদেব, পৃষ্ঠা-৮০

১২) তদেব, ঠাকুরের দিব্যভাব ও নরেন্দ্রনাথ, দশম অধ্যায়, পৃষ্ঠা-১৩৮



The marble image of Sri Ramakrishna worshipped
at the temple of Belur Math, sculpted by Gopeshwar Pal

Annexure I

Programme of the Seminar

Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas and Our Times:
A Retrospect on His 175th Birth Anniversary

Day I: 19 January 2012, Thursday

Inaugural Session: 10am-11.45am

Vedic Chanting: Monks of the Ramakrishna Order

Welcome Address: Swami Tyagarupananda,
Principal, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira

Introductory Remarks: Swami Sarvabhutananda,
Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Golpark, Kolkata

Presentation of the Theme of the Seminar: Sandipan Sen,
Convener, Seminar Organizing Committee

Keynote Address: Swami Prabhananda,
General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math & Mission

Speech: Swami Divyananda,
Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira

1st Academic Session: 11.45am-1pm

Speech: *Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Life in Nineteenth Century Bengal*
Speaker: Amiya Prosad Sen,
Professor of Modern Indian History, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Presentation of Paper: *Sri Ramakrishna's Love for Visual Devotional Art*
Paper presenter: Anirban Ray,
Research Scholar, Department English, Jadavpur University
Presentation of Paper: *Sri Ramakrishna and His Chief Disciple*
Paper presenter: Swami Tyagarupananda,
Principal, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira

2nd Academic Session: 2pm-5pm

Speech: *Sri Ramakrishna and His Times*
Speaker: Sabyasachi Bhattacharya,
Formerly Vice-Chancellor, Visva Bharati, Santiniketan
Presentation of Paper: *The Lord and His Son: Thakur Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda at Crossroads*
Paper presenter: Saptarshi Mallick,
Research Scholar, Department of English, Calcutta University
Presentation of Paper: *Sri Sri Ramakrishna O Tnar Baishnabsadhana*
Paper presenter: Purba Sen Gupta,
Senior Research Fellow, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Golpark

Speech: *Sri Ramakrishna as Acine Gāch: 'The Tree Without a Name'*
Speaker: Swami Tyagananda,
Monk-in-Charge, Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Boston, USA
Presentation of Paper: *Sri Ramakrishna and the Colonial Urban Bengali Milieu*
Paper presenter: Karabi Mitra,
Associate Professor, Department of History, Bijoy Krishna Girls' College

Cultural Programme: 6pm-7pm

Vocal Rendition: Omkar Srikant Dadarkar,
ITC Sangeet Research Academy, Kolkata

Day II: 20 January 2012, Friday

3rd Academic Session: 10am-1pm

Speech: *We and some Ideas of Sri Ramakrishna*
Speaker: Pradyot Kumar Mukhopadhyay,
Formerly Professor of Philosophy, Jadavpur University

Presentation of Paper: *Sri Ramakrishna O Vishishtadvaitavad*
Paper presenter: Antara Banerjee,
Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit, Barasat Government College
Presentation of Paper: *Fish and Fisherman Imagery in Sri Ramakrishna's Teachings: Discourses on Power and Beyond in the Light of the Vedas and Mahabharata*
Paper presenter: Indrajit Bandyopadhyay,
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kalyani Mahavidyalaya

Speech: *Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas: from a Feminist Perspective*
Speaker: Sabujkoli Sen,
Professor of Philosophy, Visva Bharati, Santiniketan

Speech: *Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas*
Speaker: Jitendra Nath Mohanty,
Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Temple University, USA

4th Academic Session: 2pm-5pm

Speech: *The Fields and the Modes of Discourses in Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*
Speaker: Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay,
Regional Secretary, Sahitya Akademi (Eastern Region)
Speech: *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: The Text for All Contexts*
Speaker: M. Sivaramkrishna,
Formerly Professor of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad

Presentation of Paper: *Sri Ramakrishna and the Concept of Truth*
Paper presenter: Mahitosh Mandal,
Research Scholar, Department of English, Jadavpur University

Speech: *Songs of Kathamrita: Music as Self-expression in Sri Ramakrishna*
Speaker: Swami Sarvagananda,
Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deoghar

Cultural Programme: 6pm-7pm

Rudra Veena Recital: Ustad Baha'ud-din Dagar,
Dhrupad Gurukul Palaspa, Mumbai

Day III: 21 January 2012, Saturday

5th Academic Session: 10am-1pm

Speech: *Sri Ramakrishna: a Friend, Philosopher and Guide*
Speaker: Pravrajika Bhaswaraprana,
Principal, Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Vivekananda Vidyabhavan

Presentation of Paper: *Ramakrishna and his ways: a Postmodern Perspective*
Paper presenter: Monalisa Mustafi,
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Khalisani Mahavidyalaya

Speech: *Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas and Islam Today*
Speaker: Syed Anwar Husain,
Professor of History, Dhaka University, Bangladesh
Presentation of Paper: *Sri Ramakrishna's Idea of God: Collective Perspective*
Paper presenter: Swami Sanmayananda,
Guest Faculty, Department of Philosophy, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira

Speech: *Sri Ramakrishna and Our Times: a Perspective from the West*
Speaker: Jeffery D. Long,
Chair, Religious Studies Department, Elizabethtown College, PA, USA

Valedictory Session: 2pm-5pm

Speech: *Bhavamukha, Sri Ramakrishna's Unique State of Consciousness*
Speaker: Swami Atmapriyananda,
Vice-Chancellor, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University

Speech: *Sri Ramakrishna's Scientific Approach to the Ultimate Reality*
Speaker: Jayanta Sircar,
Associate Dean, Harvard School of Engineering & Applied Sciences, USA

Valedictory Address: *Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas and Our Times*
Speaker: Swami Bhajanananda,
Assistant Secretary, Ramakrishna Math & Mission

Vote of Thanks: Swami Shastrajnananda,
Vice-Principal, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira

Cultural Programme: 6pm-7pm

Sitar Recital: Indrajit Roy-Chowdhury,
New York, USA

[*The designations of the speakers noted here are as on the date of the event.*]

Annexure II

Members of the Seminar Organizing Committee:

Swami Tyagarupananda
Principal, RKM Vidyamandira & Chairperson, the Organizing Committee

Swami Shastrajnananda
Vice-Principal, RKM Vidyamandira

Sandipan Sen
Convener, Seminar Organizing Committee

Jatisankar Chattopadhyay
Head, Department of Political Science, RKM Vidyamandira

Tapan Kumar Ghosh
Head, Department of Economics, RKM Vidyamandira

Swarup Roy
Head, Department of English, RKM Vidyamandira

Priyabrata Ghoshal
Head, Department of Bengali, RKM Vidyamandira

Swami Krishnanathananda
Faculty, Department of Economics, RKM Vidyamandira

Shubhankar Roy
Coordinator, the Seminar Sub-committee, Vidyamandira Teachers' Council

Gautam Mukhopadhyay
Coordinator, Cultural Sub-committee, Vidyamandira Teachers' Council

Swami Chandrakantananda
Representative of the Secretary, RKM Institute of Culture, Golpark

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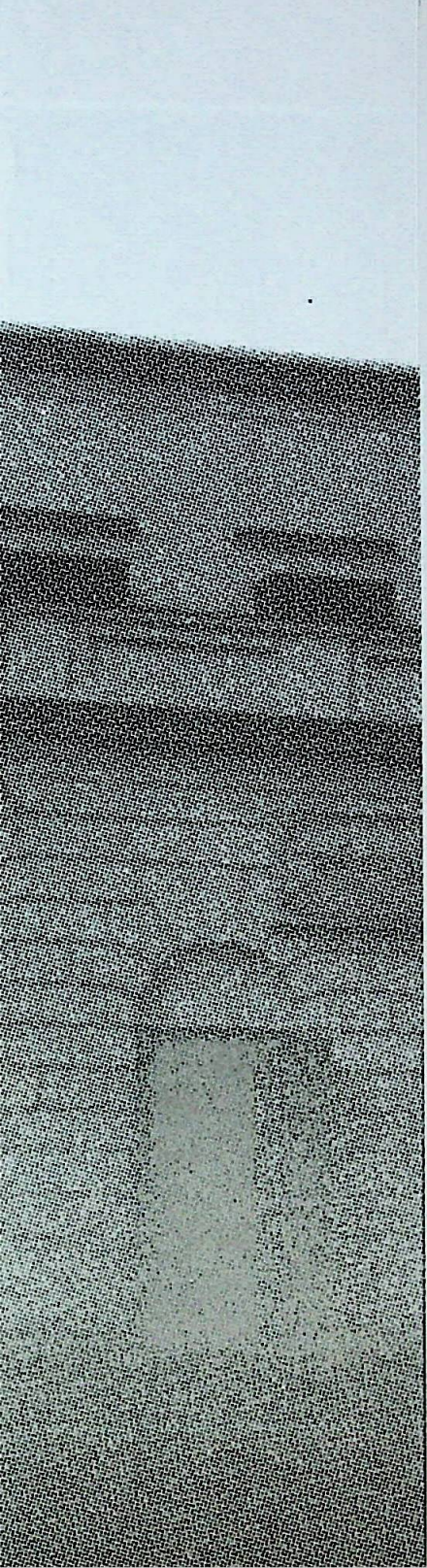

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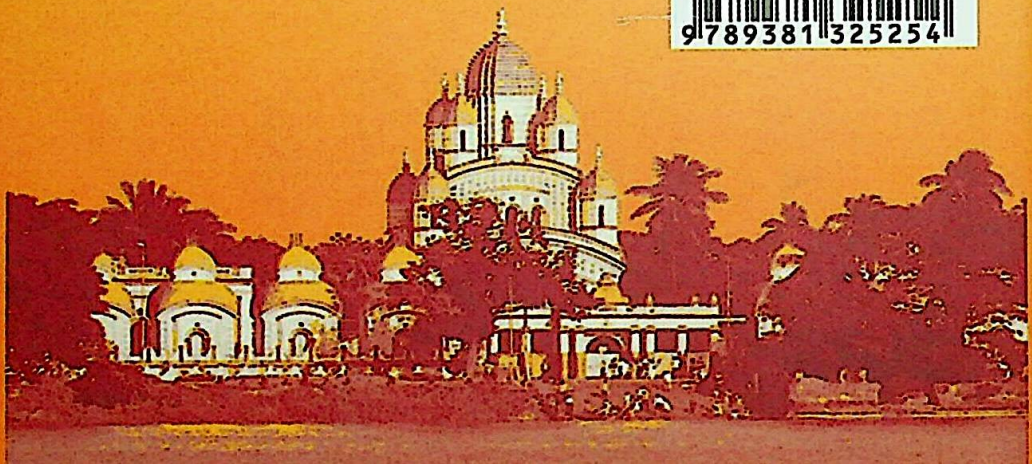
This commemorative volume is an attempt to draw our attention to the personality and ideas of Sri Ramakrishna (1836-86) on his 175th birth anniversary. Sri Ramakrishna was a thoroughly spiritual person. However, only those aspects of his ideas have been focused here with which we can engage on an intellectual and emotional level.

The contributors include monks of the Ramakrishna Order as well as internationally acclaimed thinkers. The essays are compiled loosely under six basic themes, namely: The Life and Times of Sri Ramakrishna; Sri Ramakrishna: The Man and His Personality; Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas; Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita as a Text; Sri Ramakrishna and Our Times; and Perspectives on Sri Ramakrishna. Of these, the concluding section contains articles by young scholars. Most of these essays were presented by the contributors at an International Seminar held at Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur Math on 19, 20 & 21 January 2012.

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